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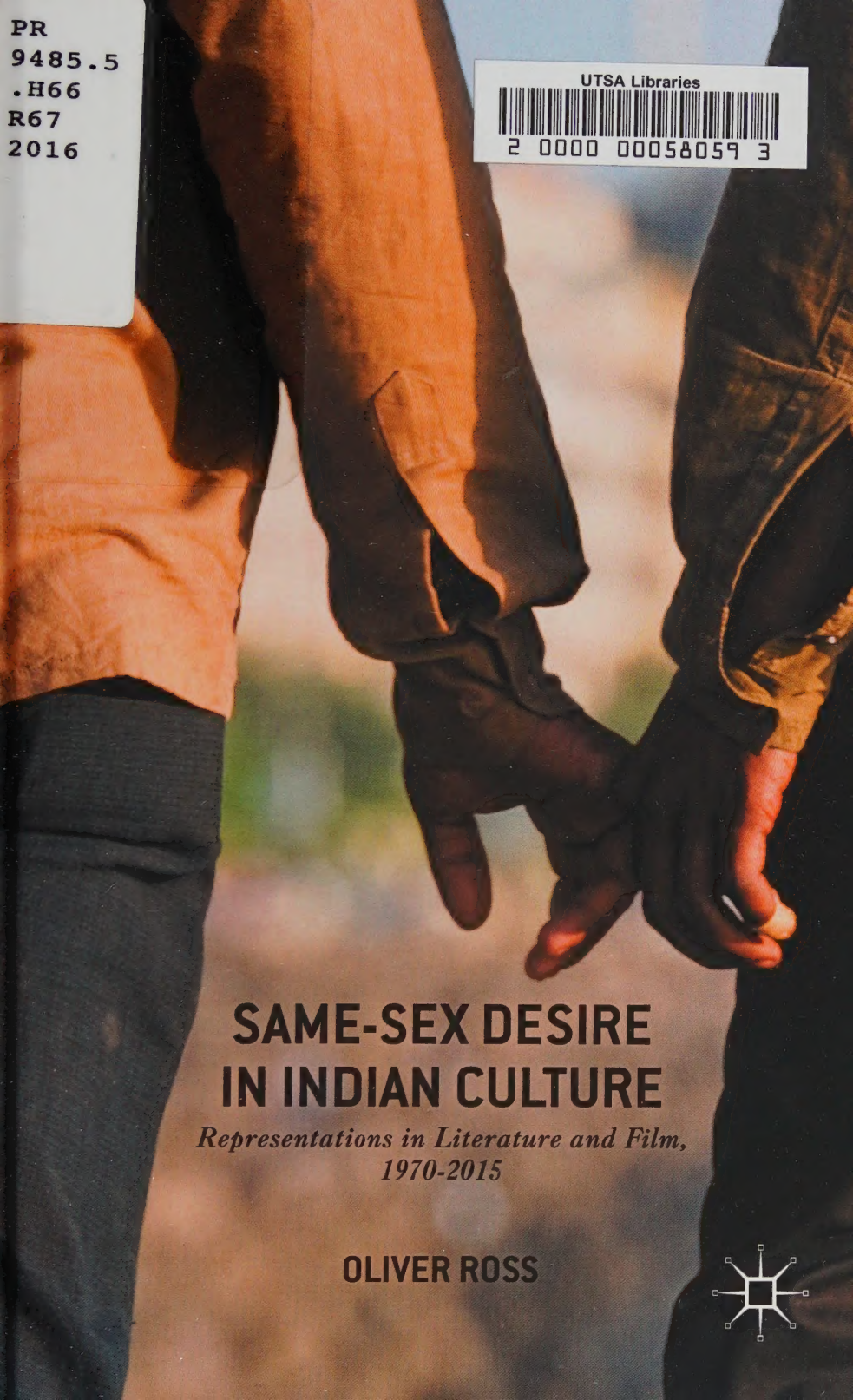

SAME-SEX DESIRE IN INDIAN CULTURE

Representations in Literature and Film, 1970-2015

OLIVER ROSS

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Same-Sex Desire in Indian Culture

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Oliver Ross

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SAME-SEX DESIRE IN INDIAN CULTURE
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First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of Nature America, Inc., One New York Plaza, Suite 4500, New York, NY 10004-1562.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Hardback ISBN: 978–1–137–57075–8
E-PUB ISBN: 978–1–137–56691–1
E-PDF ISBN: 978–1–137–56692–8
DOI: 10.1057/9781137566928

Distribution in the UK, Europe and the rest of the world is by Palgrave Macmillan®, a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Ross, Oliver, 1980–
Title: Same-sex desire in Indian culture : representations in literature and film, 1970–2015 / Oliver Ross.
Description: New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015025068 | ISBN 9781137570758 (hardback)
Subjects: LCSH: Indic literature (English)—20th century—History and criticism. | Indic literature (English)—21st century—History and criticism. | Homosexuality in literature. | Sex role in literature. | Motion pictures—India—History—20th century. | Homosexuality in motion pictures. | Sex role in motion pictures. | Motion pictures—Social aspects—India. | BISAC: LITERARY CRITICISM / General. | LITERARY CRITICISM / Asian / Indic. | PERFORMING ARTS / Film & Video / History & Criticism.
Classification: LCC PR9485.5.H66 R67 2016 | DDC 820.9/353—dc23
LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015025068

A catalogue record for the book is available from the British Library.

Library
University of Texas
at San Antonio

Contents

List of Figures vii

Acknowledgments ix

Note on Translation xi

Introduction 1

1 Contradictions or Syncretism? The Politics of Female–Female Desire in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Ligy J. Pullappally's *Sancharram* (*The Journey*) 43

2 "Am I Lesbian?" The Contexts of Female–Female Desire in the Work of Kamala Das 63

3 "The Bliss I Could Portray": Elliptical and Declamatory Male–Male Desire in the Work of Vikram Seth 87

4 Communal Tensions: Homosexuality in Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* and Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* 107

5 Transitional Mediations: Homosexuality in *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages*, and *Quest/Thaang* 133

Conclusion 159

Notes 165

Bibliography 187

Index 201

Figures

1.1 *Sancharram*: Kiran and Delilah on the steps of the bathing pond 60
5.1 *My Brother Nikhil*: Nigel, Anu, and Nikhil 142
5.2 *68 Pages:* Kiran and Mohit at home 151

Acknowledgments

In no particular order, I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council, who provided the initial funding for this project; my colleagues at the University of Cambridge, especially Andrew Taylor, Christopher Warnes, and Malachi McIntosh; my mother, Penelope Ross; Priyamvada Gopal, my former dissertation supervisor at Cambridge, whose support has been the greatest constant of my academic career; and Ruth Vanita, without whom none of this would have been possible.

Note on Translation

Whenever possible, languages other than English have been transcribed or transliterated using the Roman alphabet and placed beside their English translations. For ease of reading, diacritical marks have only been used for longer quotations in Hindi.

Introduction

> In the Delhi I grew up in, everything happened. Married women fell in love with pubescent girls, boys climbed up sewage pipes to consort with their neighbors' wives, and students went down on their science teachers in the lab. But no one ever talked about it.
>
> *Babyji*, Abha Dawesar[1]

Set in 1980s New Delhi, Abha Dewasar's *Babyji* explores the sexual and romantic relationships between Anamika, the novel's adolescent protagonist, and three other women. Here, at the beginning of the narrative, this phenomenon of "married women" falling "in love with pubescent girls," a transgression that Dawesar implicitly ranks alongside extramarital and student–teacher sex, is not uncommon but merely unmentioned. Her location of these unspoken sexual practices in the past gestures wryly toward the altered attitudes that permitted a sexually explicit, "lesbian" work like *Babyji* to be published and disseminated in India: by 2005, the year of the novel's emergence, the same-sex relationships which "no one ever talked about" had entered public discussion. These ongoing sexuality debates, while demonstrating different degrees of tolerance or aversion, have partly been fueled by representations of "gays" and "lesbians"[2] in Indian literature and film, and the airing of numerous controversies has in turn facilitated the discursive proliferation of "homosexuality" across all Indian media. The present work argues that this trajectory, often carelessly read as "development" in the wake of Euro-American liberalism, is far more complex and uneven than it might first appear. The rights of men who love men and women who love women should not be conflated with "Western modernity," because open accounts of same-sex desire existed prior to India's incorporation into the British Empire, which imported both the psychosexual definition of homosexuality and virulent homophobia. In the contemporary era, gay and lesbian identities, themselves part of a multi-faceted Euro-American history

of sexuality, coexist and overlap with other formulations of same-sex desire in India, many of which survived the colonial era in changed and codified forms. The literary and cinematic representation of these interactions, increasingly common since the 1970s, lies at the center of this book.

The purpose of this enquiry is not only to add to the limited corpus of criticism on representations of same-sex desire in Indian literature and film, but also to address the lack of close analysis in existing studies; to cite Hoshang Merchant, much of this scholarship deals with "contexts, not . . . texts."[3] One potent example is the critical writing on Deepa Mehta's "lesbian" film *Fire*,[4] released in India in 1998. This incendiary work has occasioned numerous scholarly appraisals, such as those of Gita Patel and Jacqueline Levitin,[5] both of whom subordinate its aesthetic value to its contextual significance as the catalyst of acrimonious national debates surrounding "lesbianism" in India. Similarly, critical responses to same-sex desire and its depiction in Indian literature and film have generally taken the form of contextualizing anthologies of essays, namely, in chronological order, *A Lotus of Another Color*, *Queering India*, *Sexual Sites: Seminal Attitudes*, *Because I Have a Voice*, *Sexualities*, and *The Phobic and the Erotic*.[6] While invaluable introductions, these volumes privilege an all-embracing perspective over the close analysis of individual texts.

My intention is not to suggest that close analysis is superior to interpretive strategies that are principally historical or that use literature and film as exponents of metanarratives like queer theory and feminism. Yet an attentive reading of specific works suggests that they encapsulate the syncretic nature of Indian formulations of same-sex desire in a nuanced manner which has yet to be addressed in most literary and film criticism. This is not a triumphal assertion that close analysis is objective and other interpretive strategies partisan or obfuscatory. The former is an ideological practice which is indelibly marked by the subjectivity of the critic; to claim otherwise would be at best ingenuous, at worst mendacious. For a European or American to espouse close reading in the domain of Anglophone Indian literature is inevitably to inflict a culture-centric bias, expressed through a continuation of the Greek and Latin schools of rhetoric, grounded in later Anglo-American notions of practical criticism. But Indians writing in English have usually partaken of an education rooted in Euro-American literary traditions. All the Anglophone writers in this study, apart from Kamala Das, received some schooling in the United Kingdom or the United States of America: Vikram Seth was educated at Oxford and Stanford,

where he abandoned economics for prosody; Neel Mukherjee studied at Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of East Anglia; and Raj Rao conducted postgraduate work at Warwick, later attending the International Writing School of the University of Iowa. It is not too outlandish, then, to interpret their work by means of close reading. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted note that "Many forms of what is sometimes called 'rhetorical criticism' treat interpretive issues without considering the ways texts engage with complex audiences . . . or practical contemporary issues . . . without relating those matters to specific times and places,"[7] and close analysis is most effective within a wider critical framework and sociopolitical context. At the same time, the present study is circumscribed by its emphasis on Anglophone Indian literature and its authorship by a white British male in the academy.

I also use verbal and visual close analysis to engage with the films that form the basis of Chapters 1 and 5, although they are linguistically more heterogeneous than the literature. While Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Amol Palekar's *Quest* were both made in English, Ligy Pullappally's *Sancharram* (*The Journey*) is in Malayalam, and Onir's *My Brother Nikhil* and Sridhar Rangayan's *68 Pages*[8] use an amalgam of English and Hindi, popularly known as Hinglish. Such juxtapositions underscore the need for sensitivity to the representational tendencies of the languages in question. Sita's (Nandita Das) remark to Radha (Shabana Azmi) in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, "There's no word in our language to describe what we are," throws down the scholarly gauntlet and demands investigation into the terminology used in the Indian languages other than English to describe female–female lovers, which will shortly be enunciated in detail. As a riposte to Sita's dichotomous logic, which tacitly pits India and "our language" against the Anglophone "West," this study focuses on the syncretism of same-sex desiring practices and identities in literature and film. My contention is that a close analysis vigilant to sexual syncretism and its origins may bring us closer to an appreciation of the complexity of same-sex desire in India, and that this hermeneutical strategy is more appropriate than certain renditions of Euro-American queer theory. At the same time, one must bear in mind the production of queer theory within Asia itself, which disallows its blanket dismissal as peripheral or neocolonial.

Gayatri Gopinath's focus in *Impossible Desires*[9] is the queer South Asian diaspora, her account of which is timely and indispensable, but her tendency to celebrate the imponderability of "indigenous" identities and practices of same-sex desire in India is troubling. Reading Ismat Chughtai's "*Lihaf*" ("The Quilt") in tandem with Deepa

Mehta's *Fire*, Gopinath avers that the latter "refuses to subscribe to the notion that the proper manifestation of same-sex eroticism is within a politics of visibility and identity."[10] This evaluation comes uncomfortably close to mimicking the invisibilizing rhetoric of *Fire* itself. As illustrated by Sita's remark, the film largely rejects the capacity of Indian institutions to elaborate or even name "local" identities of female–female desire, while simultaneously refusing to use the label "lesbian." Gopinath's admiration for the political inscrutability of Sita and Radha's relationship is at odds with her overall argument, which laments the unthinkability of the queer female subject in South Asia. There are moments where *Impossible Desires* reconstitutes this subject as an immature citizen, waiting to be queered by her radicalized diasporic counterpart, lacking the ability to politicize female–female desire on her own. Part of my aim is to disrupt this latent opposition, shifting the lens away from queer diaspora and analyzing representations of same-sex desire in modern India. Given the syncretic qualities of Indian narratives and embodiments of identity, it is important to view the binary of "indigenous" versus "foreign" as increasingly untenable within the imbrications of transnationalism and globalization, and thus demanding circumspection. Before delineating the purchase of syncretism and its applicability in the context of Indian sexualities, it will be necessary to establish a theoretical framework pertaining to "homosexuality."

Biological Essentialism, Social Constructionism, and Global Queerness

My methodology is informed by the debate between social constructionism and biological essentialism in sexuality studies, which reached a zenith in the 1980s and 1990s. John De Cecco and John Elia define the opposing positions as follows:

> Biological essentialism depicts a process in which biological influences precede cultural influences and set predetermined limits to the effects of culture. In effect, it submerges sexual preference, a human process, into sexual orientation, a biological mechanism. Social constructionism tends to depict the individual as an empty organism that is filled and shaped by culture and society and is devoid of consciousness and intention.[11]

Social constructionism in sexuality studies is usually said to have begun with the work of Michel Foucault, who posited in the late 1970s that homosexuality and heterosexuality are not natural and innate

sexual orientations but rather discursive inventions of the nineteenth century.[12] For example, Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 1886 forensic treatise, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, was among the earliest works to demarcate a schema of heterosexuality, bisexuality, and homosexuality, alongside a litany of sexual perversions. One of the major precursors of queer theory, which did not emerge as a term until 1990, Foucault influenced the social constructionist *Weltanschauung* of commentators like Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michael Warner, and David Halperin. As Halperin argued in 1989, "Unlike sex, sexuality is a cultural production: it represents the appropriation of the human body and of its physiological capacities by an ideological discourse. Sexuality is not a somatic fact; it is a cultural effect."[13] Halperin's statement was made over twenty years ago, and present-day queer theory rarely articulates the biological essentialist/social constructionist debate in these terms, instead adopting, in the words of W. C. Harris, "the now commonsense conviction that essentialisms are always bad."[14] As a radical investigation into the putative constructedness of sex, gender, and sexuality, queer theory, as distinct from the more heterogeneous queer studies, is predicated on antiessentialism. Were it to reify identity, it would be succumbing to the normative forces that it endeavors to resist. In opposition, political and public perceptions of sexuality are heavily influenced by scientific formulations of sexual orientation as a biological given, although the question of "nature or nurture," a popular variant of the essentialist/constructionist debate, remains polemical and unanswerable.

Rather than imposing biological essentialist or social constructionist preconceptions, my approach involves examining how the works that form the basis of this study suggest that sexuality is intrinsic and absolute or that it is produced by history and society. In the literature and film in question, "homosexual," "gay," and "lesbian" are often treated as essential identities which are universal and ineluctable, but such a position is frequently aligned with the "West." This is not necessarily indicative of the time-honored absence of essentialist terminology in India to denote what many see as the biological singularity of men who desire men and women who desire women, but rather of the obscuring of this taxonomy by Euro-American medical/psychological discourse. It often appears that there is no "indigenous" term capable of essentializing sexuality, and local formulations of same-sex desire emerge as an indeterminate set of practices, thereby corroborating the arguments of social constructionism. As will shortly be discussed, however, there is a plethora of precedents and models, and a plurality of traditions, which

could be invoked when theorizing same-sex desire in India today. Ironically, social constructionists frequently cite the supposed lack of a nomenclature of sexual orientation in parts of "the Global South," but the affirmation that the "West" invented this concept and coined the uniquely essentialist identitarian signifier of "homosexuality" is neocolonialist. Such condescension ignores the extent to which Euro-American sexualities were influenced by formations from outside this region, as well as the eclipsing of analogous taxonomies by the global spread of the British empire and its attitudes of Victorian Puritanism; the psychosexual configuration of homosexuality displaced, not fully but partially, many preexisting models on the subcontinent.

There also exists a disparity between those who deploy queer theory in the Indian context unreservedly, those who use it with hesitance, and those who avoid it altogether. Gopinath's remarks in *Impossible Desires* emblematize the former attitude:

> What emerges within this alternative cartography are subjects, communities, and practices that bear little resemblance to the universalized "gay" identity imagined within a Eurocentric gay imaginary.
>
> Queer sexualities as articulated by the texts I consider here reference familiar tropes and signifiers of Euro-American homosexuality—such as the coming-out narrative and its attendant markers of secrecy and disclosure, as well as gender inversion and cross-dressing—while investing them with radically different and distinct significations. It is through a particular engagement with South Asian public culture, and popular culture in particular, that this defamiliarization of conventional markers of homosexuality takes place, and that alternative strategies through which to signify non-heteronormative desire are subsequently produced. These alternative strategies suggest a mode of reading and "seeing" same-sex eroticism that challenges modern epistemologies of visibility, revelation, and sexual subjectivity.[15]

Gopinath dismisses the proponents of transnational gay identity as irremediably Eurocentric, whereas the practitioner of queer theory apparently has a complex and sensitive appreciation of South Asian expressions of same-sex eroticism, without subjecting them to the same distortions and reductions, and the possibility that queer theory itself might be underpinned by universalism remains unacknowledged. In Gopinath's project there emerges the contradictory impulse to celebrate Indian resistance to vociferous sexual politics *and* to imply that these salutary politics can only be realized by means of the queer theory which emerges from Euro-American academia. Automatically

describing "non-heteronormative"[16] desire in South Asia as "queer," even as a heuristic, often comes at the expense of other descriptors of sexual self-expression. More broadly, if queer theory is applied to the "Global South" in unexamined ways, its drive to politicize the putatively apolitical sexual subject mimics the neocolonial aspects of gay internationalism.

Hoshang Merchant's aggressive reaction to "Western" theorizations of "India's gays" provides a stark contrast, representing as it does the objections of a widespread contingent:

> I simply said western theory was not relevant in India. I do not theorise first and then live. I live my life as an Indian gay in India, write about it and then leave it to NRIs in the West to theorise about gay lives in India.[17]

Merchant's vision is exaggeratedly dichotomous, but he provides a useful starting point for interrogating the mores that have led to the increasingly globalized reach and remit of queer theory. One of the paradoxes at the heart of most queer theory is manifest: if it considers itself a sustained critique of essentialism, it cannot escape the institutional measures that essentialize it as a discipline. The term "queer theory" connotes marketability, while academic conferences and curricula around the world sell themselves as "queer," which is all too often recast as an up-to-the-minute "buzzword," so that the nonnormative is forever folded back into normativity via free market capitalism and the conceptual need for disciplinary demarcation. If Teresa de Lauretis was the first to use the denotation "queer theory" in 1990, she dissociated herself from it soon afterward, remarking, "As for 'queer theory', my insistent specification lesbian may well be taken as a taking of distance from what, since I proposed it as a working hypothesis for lesbian and gay studies in this very journal [differences, 3.2], has very quickly become a conceptually vacuous creature of the publishing industry."[18] De Lauretis' critique seems extreme, but she does usefully limn some of the elisions on which queer theory as a discipline depends.

Since the early 2000s, queer theory, like feminist theory before it, has acknowledged its implicit positioning of the white subject, usually gay, lesbian, transvestite, or transgender, at the foundation of its critique of society. The year 2005 saw the publication of *What's Queer about Queer Studies Now?*, which prescribes the diversification of the theoretical branch of queer studies into a more multivocal, multiracial critique, with a greater focus on diaspora and globalization. At various junctures in this collection, the ethical imperative of multiracial

representation is subordinated to a concern for the disciplinary future of queer theory, which is said to be dependent on greater inclusiveness. The Perverse Modernities monographs engage in similar projects, recuperating the voices of previously silent African Americans, Latinos, Filipinos, Indians, and Native Americans, to name but a few. To echo Sanjay Srivastava, who suggests that many works of sexual anthropology have an " 'improving-the-West' perspective,"[19] there is something unnerving in the attempt to consolidate a Euro-American theoretical methodology by underlining its ability to assimilate ethnicities and nationalities on a global scale. India, too, has been the object of such self-reflexive analysis; for example, Gayatri Reddy notes that most existing studies of *hijras* ("eunuchs" or "transgenders"—see below) use the existence of a "third gender" in India to displace Euro-American narratives of dimorphic gender and sexuality, while simultaneously demonstrating condescending solicitude toward the subalternized *hijra*.[20]

Returning to queer theory, the newfound concern with the intersections of nonheteronormativity, race, and diaspora is counterintuitive in light of the assertion that "queer" has "no fixed political referent":

> That queerness remains open to a continuing critique of its exclusionary operations has always been one of the field's key theoretical and political promises. What might be called the "subjectless" critique of queer studies disallows any positioning of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no fixed political referent. Such an understanding orients queer epistemology, despite the historical necessities of "strategic essentialism" (Gayatri Spivak's famous term), as a continuous deconstruction of the tenets of positivism at the heart of identity politics.[21]

With "strategic essentialism" consigned to history, queerness appears reduced to a free-floating signifier of difference; seemingly divorced from nonheteronormativity, it is reinvested with the ubiquitous applicability it possessed before acquiring "gay" and "gender-deviant" connotations, and before it was imbued with affirmative political significance. The intention behind such expressions of detachment is clearly to redress and reorient the discipline's exclusions in the past, as well as to reaffirm queer theory's relationship to deconstructionism. Yet the apparent interchangeability of these theories is misleading, given that deconstructionism has the potential to fully dismantle its subjects and objects, while queer theory uses a deconstructionist methodology but paradoxically maintains specific objects of enquiry for disciplinary coherence. In this sense, in their professed disaggregation of queer

theory from nonheteronormativity, many queer theorists are paving the way for the implosion of the field. While such a result is perhaps inevitable in any deconstructionist project, there prevail, as I have noted, vested interests in scholarly survival, most of which are grounded in thinly veiled capitalist concerns. The limiting scope of analyzing nonheteronormativity must be retained in the interests of capital, which in turn requires the exponential globalization of the discipline into regions like India, even as it is disclaimed in the name of deconstructionism.

The expansion of queerness into an untethered signifier may also devalue the historical and material struggle out of which queer self-identifications emerged; as Lisa Duggan argued in 1992, "There is a tendency among queer theorists to engage in academic debates at a high level of intellectual sophistication, while erasing the political activist roots of their theoretical insights and concerns."[22] The present-day usage of "queer" was partly determined in 1990 by the formation of Queer Nation, a New York-based organization whose goal was to draw attention to GLBTQ citizens and combat the prejudice they faced. The group's reclamation of "queer," which had (and still has) connotations of exclusion and abjection, especially as a disparaging signifier of nonnormative gender and sexuality, strategically inverted the defamatory rhetoric of homophobic movements.[23] In *Homos*, Leo Bersani considers how some iterations of antiessentialist "theory" have compromised such political interventions:

> What's troubling is that, in rejecting the essentializing identities derived from sexual preference, they mount a resistance to homophobia in which the agent of resistance has been erased: there is no longer any homosexual subject to oppose the homophobic subject. The desirable social transgressiveness of gayness—its aptitude for contesting oppressive structures—depends not on denying a gay identity, but rather on exploring the links between a specific sexuality, psychic mobility, and a potentially radical politics.[24]

Many queer theorists would argue that these remarks, made almost twenty years ago, are outmoded; as Jasbir Puar observes, "Displacing queerness as an identity or modality that is visibly, audibly, legibly, or tangibly evident—the seemingly queer body in a 'cultural freeze-frame' of sorts—assemblages allows us to attune to movements, intensities, emotions, energies, affectivities, and textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities."[25] David Eng's idealization of the "radical political aspirations of queer theory's subjectless critique" and

his reiteration of "queer" as "a political metaphor without a fixed referent"[26] also augur the semantic emptying of the term, so it seems arbitrary that Eng and Puar's monographs remain concerned with nonheteronormativity at all.

My own aversion to using the word "queer" as a metaphor without a fixed referent, divorced from GLBTI subjects, partly stems from an appreciation of its activist origins. Queer Nation, for instance, repeatedly used the slogan "Dykes and Fags Bash Back!" to protest homophobic violence. This is not to trivialize antiessentialist politics, after the fashion of those who "commonsensically" use "queer" as shorthand for gay or lesbian, but to affirm that they are built on a discursive elision. Initially, the semantic instability and polysemy of "queer" could be used to counter homophobia without submitting to the identitarian binary of pro-gay contra anti-gay, but the term was swiftly inflected by the unavoidably dichotomous logic of political resistance. However internally differentiated and self-reflexive this resistance is, it must represent itself as coherent and monolithic in order to combat the essentialism of public and state prejudice, to the extent that what may begin as strategic essentialism[27] inevitably metamorphoses into a more homogenizing sense of group identity. Deploying "queer" in exaggeratedly generalized ways, as in phrases like "queering the air" or "queering the Atlantic," depends on continuously disowning or forgetting the historically indispensable binary thinking of early queer politics. Further, the rejection of essentialism has political implications for "sexual liberation" movements in India; if queerness and the "continuous deconstruction" of queer theory are conflated, there remains little room for maneuver in a nation where "homosexuality" is *de facto* criminalized. Perhaps denying Indians the benefits of claiming "queerness" as a concrete and specific identity which can be mobilized in the campaign for decriminalization is the most severe exclusionary measure of all. This is not to say that Indian subjects should claim "queerness" as an essential identity, but they should not be divested of that right. As W. C. Harris argues, "[In queer theory] essentialism became what institutions do to individuals, an imposing, policing mechanism. And it's not that identities can't be that. It's just that their other characteristics—motility, agency—are being shortchanged."[28] He pleads for a more generous and less divisive engagement with queerness which recognizes its potential for "both the queering of roles and identities and the perpetuation of such identities."[29]

It is difficult to adequately reflect the experiences of outlawed "non-heteronormative" subjects in South Asia by means of the term "queer," for its usage in this region has been quite different from that in Euro-America. Among the British colonials the word evolved into a catch-all descriptor of the natives' strangeness and their difference from Europeans. That is, it both expressed and enabled the dismissal of an entire culture, its usage no longer limited to individual oddities. For instance, E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, published in 1924, is littered with the word "queer." Yonatan Touval notes that "It's as though queerness is the stuff things Indian (or, like Fielding, Adela, and Mrs Moore, things gone Indian) are made of, the very essence of Indianicity. Or if not India's essence, at least its identity."[30] Whether or not Forster problematizes the rendition of India as "queer" is moot, but it is clear that the formula would have been intelligible, and probably quite familiar and welcome, to the British reading public. This is borne out by George Franks' *Queer India*, written around eight years after *A Passage to India*, in 1932. In his explanatory introduction, he opines, "Judged by modern standards, it is a queer India—an India in which mediaeval superstition is as much mingled with primitive savagery as it is with up-to-the date ideas."[31] If under colonialism, queer came to convey the very essence of an apparently primitive Indian identity, the Indian people as a whole, and the lands they inhabited, this Orientalist and imperialist resignification amplifies queerness so that it is no longer usable in the instance of the individual anomaly, aberration, or perversion within a supposedly "normal" environment (the apotheosis of the latter was, for Forster and Franks, early- to mid-twentieth-century Britain). The colonial trajectory of "queer" and the specific forms of oppositionality it engendered, which continue to inform the present, must be accounted for. Without this historicism, as Euro-American queer theory turns its ameliorative gaze toward India, it runs the risk of reproducing this supercilious colonial logic.

Words such as "gay," "lesbian," "transsexual," and "transgender" do circulate as self-claimed markers of identity on a significant scale in India and have done so for several decades. Self-referential "queer" identities have emerged, but these, like "gay" and "lesbian," usually signify homosexuality. There are also various terms for same-sex desiring practices and identities in the Indian languages other than English, so perhaps it is the least invidious option to use the identifications of Indian subjects as a self-aware practice of citation. In this study I work with queer theory, many of whose insights have been invaluable,

but I do not designate all "nonheteronormativity" in India as "queer." My focus is specifically on love and sex between men and between women, which, where textual or filmic precedents are absent, I describe as "same-sex desire," "male–male desire," "female–female desire," and "homoeroticism." The limitations of these labels and their rootedness in Anglophone scholarship are manifest, but they do point to different cultural formulations of sexual identity and practice. Following Judith Butler and others, I use "male" and "female" with full awareness of the difficulty of separating discursive constructions of gender from biological sex.[32] I have also drawn on queer theory and queer studies where appropriate, especially following the examples of the writers and filmmakers themselves.

Traditions, Taxonomies, and the Possibility of Syncretism

Many scholars and activists object to using the term "gay" in the Indian context, claiming it contributes to dismissals of Indian identity politics as unevolved and primitive, in urgent need of "Western" sophistication. Contrary to this model of usurpation, "gay identity" coexists with descriptors of sexual practices and identities that have different histories of theorization and usage in India. It is important to insist on contemporaneity and syncretism, then, rather than establishing a binary opposition between gay identity as transnational modernity, implied by theorists like Dennis Altman,[33] and age-old "indigenous" identities of same-sex desire. Following Sedgwick's seminal work *Epistemology of the Closet*, Gayatri Reddy remarks:

> As Sedgwick contends, we need to relinquish the narrative of rupture that has sustained the discourse of sexuality in the wake of Foucault. As she states, "Issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times that they do coexist" (Sedgwick 1990, 47). The present seems to be one of those times in India when apparently different systems cohabit in a single social field. The simultaneous presence of these "different" sexual classificatory grids in India and their varying emphases on modernity illustrate the fluid constructions of sexual subjectivity in this region.[34]

In the Anglo-American context one observes such "unrationalized coexistence" in the present-day overlapping of different sexual identities and practices like "heterosexual," "straight," "gay," "queer,"

"lesbian," "dyke," "Sapphist," "homosexual," "sodomite," "bugger," and so forth. Similarly, Reddy's analysis disrupts claims made elsewhere for the hierarchization of "gay" and "indigenous" sexual identities and practices in India so that one is portrayed as more robust or authentic than another. According to Foucault's narrative of supersession, sodomy, a practice considered transgressive primarily within a medieval Christian schema of sin and confession, was displaced in the nineteenth century by the singular identity marker "homosexual," which was elaborated by medical, psychiatric, and legal discourse in subsequent years.[35] His argument that in this period numerous taxonomies of sexuality and perversity supplanted earlier notions of sex and desire, primarily to control citizens and their bodies, is frequently considered axiomatic, but it seems inadequate both in Euro-America and to theorize the syncretic overlapping of multiple sexual practices and identities in modern India.

Much of the scholarship on sexuality in this region reflects the struggle between advocates of apparently "imported" or "foreign" descriptors and those who favor "local" labels, and it is significant that the Indian languages other than English contain numerous terms for identities and practices of same-sex desire. Those that denote biological men include the *kothi* (used throughout India), the *durani* (Calcutta), and the *menaka* (Cochin), usually receptive partners in anal/oral intercourse who perform a feminine identity and refer to themselves as women. The *panthi* is an India-wide specification for the *kothi*'s normatively masculine penetrating counterpart whose sexual practices do not affect his sense of gender identity. The *do paratha*, by contrast, is a more liminal figure who enjoys both "active" and "passive" sexual roles. The *hijra*, definable in Euro-America as a eunuch, or a male-to-female transvestite or transsexual, cannot automatically be interpolated in discourses of same-sex desire, as noted by Gayatri Reddy, given that many *hijras* remain celibate and some are attracted to women. These identities have been documented by Gayatri Reddy, Shivananda Khan, and Ashok Row Kavi,[36] among others. In a patriarchal society where women's sexuality often remains undiscussed or relegated to the private sphere, the terms for female–female desire are more ambiguous, tending to suggest friendship rather than sexuality. Suparna Bhaskaran alludes to this problematic, seeing her usage of "queer, desi dyke, dyke, khush, sakhi, shamakami or gay" as a means of making "worlds out of words and the meanings you ascribe to them instead of being paralyzed by authenticity politics."[37] The ostensibly "indigenous" identities she cites are equivocal and polysemic, or they represent recent coinages that

map the term "lesbian" from English into the other Indian languages. If the Hindi *sakhi* historically referred to friendships between women that might have extended to eroticism, the Bengali *shamakami* means "desiring one's equal," with neither overtly signifying female–female desire originally. The explicit Urdu noun *chapatbaz*, meaning a woman who "rubs," that is, has sex with, other women, was common in Lucknowi culture prior to 1857 (see below), although it is not widely used in present-day India. Other historical terms such as *swayamvara sakhi* (self-chosen special female friend) have been documented, but these are rarely straightforwardly sexual,[38] just as the widespread *saheli*, while holding romantic connotations, primarily refers to friendship.

Many intellectuals and activists have explored using the Hindi/Urdu word *khush* (happy) to mean gayness, pleasure, and ecstasy. In her documentary of the same name, Pratibha Parmar interviews both men and women who identify with the term.[39] To deride these efforts is to ignore how "gay" came into being in Euro-America as the reinvention of a prior signifier whose initial referent was largely unrelated to homosexual identity, although the difference between "gay" and "*khush*" is clear. If "gay" carried overtones of licentiousness and libertinism in the 1600s or perhaps even earlier in Britain and America, it was not until the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries that it became yoked to homosexuality as a psychosexual orientation. The difficulty of dating the semantic evolution of the word indicates that its later usage did not emerge from an isolated neologism but was the product of a more general and diffuse association of excess and immorality with homoeroticism, of which the phrase "gay abandon" is symptomatic. "Lesbian," too, began to be used as an identity of female-female desire in the late nineteenth century, and it spread gradually in subsequent years, partly through events such as the 1928 trial of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness*. In contrast, the reinvention of *khush* as gay or lesbian is dependent on the political beliefs of a few individuals and their ability to disseminate the term to the extent that it acquires linguistic currency. Such a gesture also entails mapping the ontological and epistemological presumptions underpinning "gay" and "lesbian," which in modernity usually describe an essential homosexual orientation or identity, into Hindi or Urdu, languages whose denotations of same-sex desire tend to be structured by different conceptions of gender and sexual subjectivity.

One of the most emphatic spokespersons for this difference is Shivananda Khan, who claims that signifiers like "gay" and "lesbian" are "inappropriate" in South Asia, critiquing "Western understandings

and constructions" of sexualities within HIV and STD prevention programs: "In the context of these programmes, we can almost say that our gender constructions, sexual behaviours and identities have once again been colonised through the casual adoption of specific understandings and conceptualisations of human behaviour that have arisen through Western cultures."[40] Khan creates a dichotomy between the West and an unalterably "different" South Asia, according to which shunning a nomenclature of "Western sexuality" is imperative in order to escape charges of neocolonialism. His later work is far more cautious, but he remains skeptical about the validity of "Western" sexual identities in South Asia. His analysis of MSM (men who have sex with men) is pertinent here, for he suggests that most "local" labels operate along the axis of gender instead of sexual orientation; the penetrator in anal sex would not question his own normative masculinity, but the penetratee would automatically be feminized.[41] Khan seems relatively untroubled by the provenance of the term "MSM" among Euro-American healthcare workers,[42] and its extensive use worldwide might parallel what he sees as the pernicious neocolonialism of the internationalization of gay identity. Similarly, Lawrence Cohen has argued that the term "*kothi*," and to a lesser extent "*panthi*," gained popularity in the mid-1990s partly because of attempts to court international HIV/AIDS funding bodies, whose desire to target South Asia in indigenously appropriate ways encouraged organizing around "local" sexual identities (see Chapter 5). According to Cohen, the Naz Foundation, headed by Shivananda Khan, played a pivotal role in such dissemination. There has been no concerted effort to map the prevalence of "*kothi*" prior to the 1990s, however, and Cohen's evidence for its rarity or early restriction to Chennai is largely anecdotal.[43]

As a less nuanced example than Khan's, Jeremy Seabrook claims that "even ideas of 'gay liberation' serve not as emancipatory slogans but as new forms of colonialism and vehicles of control."[44] Such an approach has the unfortunate effect of reifying the opposition between "foreign" and "indigenous" sexualities, and this supposedly anticolonial gesture ironically becomes a supreme instance of neocolonialism, as Indian subjects are denied the right to claim labels like "gay" and "bisexual" at all. Those who, following well-trodden Orientalist thoroughfares, prefer to see Indian sexualities as entirely fluid, including Seabrook, celebrate widespread Hindi descriptions of male–male sexual activity as "*masti*" (fun) or "*enjoy karna*" (to "enjoy").

The "authenticity debate" lies at the heart of this study; it is the impossibility of sexual authenticity or terminological purity that

displaces the hierarchization of "Western" and "Indian" conceptions of sexual desire and practice. Instead of embracing the oppositional logic of "foreign" versus "indigenous" or gay versus *kothi*, these identities and practices can usefully be seen as irretrievably syncretic. As Suparna Bhaskaran has noted of the interviewees for her anthropological analysis of "gay" activism in India, "Many . . . either identified as gay or multiply identified as gay and kothi . . . all these 'categories' were internally heterogeneous and coexisted, overlapped and brushed up against each other."[45] In other words, these "categories" are syncretized. The following Oxford English Dictionary definition elucidates this usage of syncretism:

1. Attempted union or reconciliation of diverse, or opposite tenets or practices, especially in philosophy or religion.
2. Philol. The merging of two or more inflectional categories.
3. Psychol. The process of fusing diverse ideas or sensations into a general (inexact) impression; an instance.

The three principal meanings of syncretism allow for a model of amalgamation and imbrication that operates at the level of culture, language, and individual subjectivity, although the application of the term in critical and cultural theory has been even more wide ranging.

In *Small Acts*, Paul Gilroy deploys "syncretism" to describe the cultures of what he calls "black Britain":

> We must look at the dependent position of black Britain within the African diaspora and at its adaptation and transformation of African-American and Caribbean forms. These cultural borrowings, mixtures and exchanges are frequently reappropriated a second time by the older, urban working-class cultural mainstream . . . Over the years, these issues have been primarily relevant to the relationship between young whites and "Afro-Caribbeans" but there are now important signs that similar processes of cultural and linguistic syncretism are beginning to take in "Asian" culture too.[46]

Gilroy adopts a celebratory attitude toward this syncretism, arguing that it results in new cultural forms whose "affirmation of difference points forward to a more pluralistic conception of nationality and perhaps beyond that to its transcendence."[47] His sense of the polyphony of syncretism as an antidote to an oppressive and ethnocentric nationalism informs my own understanding of the concept. While it is difficult to share his utopianism, focusing on syncretism is a useful means of critiquing the unitary and culturally essentialist

myopia which often arises in the debates on same-sex desire, helping to destabilize the nationalism inherent in damaging commonplaces like "Homosexuality is alien to Indian culture."

My conceptualization of syncretism is also informed by Edward Said's earlier corrective to nationalist theories of homogeneity in *Culture and Imperialism*: "Partly because of Empire, all cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic."[48] In the present context, Said's words signpost us toward the historical encounter between an imperial homosexuality and "local" identities and practices of same-sex desire in India. His juxtaposition of hybridity and extraordinary differentiation evokes the fusion or imbrication of initially discrete cultural forms and their coexistence in a single sociopolitical domain or subjectivity, whether the provenance of such forms be discerned and accounted for or remain unidentified and unrationalized.

Recent dialogues between queer and postcolonial studies have led to analyses of hybrid and syncretic same-sex desiring practices and identities in Asia, although investigations of the phenomenon in India are conspicuously rare. Chong Kee Tan has argued that "We do not . . . find a pristine Taiwanese homosexuality but a confluence of local and imported conceptions, underpinned by economic, social, and political systems, producing distinct and sometimes conflicting hybrid models of what (homo)sexuality is."[49] In a 2001 article, Chris Berry refers to "hybridization . . . [which] occurs at the level of representation and self-representation"[50] in East Asian films dealing with lesbian and gay identities. It may be more useful to theorize these confluences using the term "syncretism," which has retained greater semantic force because of its undertheorization in the humanities and social sciences. "Hybridity," on the other hand, is overused and overgeneralized, as suggested by Marwin M. Kraidy, who notes "the emptiness of employing [it] as a universal description of culture."[51] "Hybridity" also seems indissociable from its early deployment in postcolonial studies as a signifier of discursive rather than material realities, whereas the definition of "syncretism" I propose conveys how formulations of same-sex desiring identities and practices are engendered and perpetuated by both these facets of existence, for it is axiomatic that "culture" is a mutually constitutive synergy of the discursive and the material.

Drawing on these accounts of syncretism and hybridity, the present work examines how Indian literature and film represent the syncretic fusion, overlapping, and coexistence of initially Euro-American and

other Indian formulations of same-sex desire, an encounter that is privileged to avoid the otherwise inevitable slippage into the true but not particularly useful declaration that all existence is syncretic. The book also explores how initially Euro-American narratives of gay, homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual existence are syncretized with heterogeneous elements of Indian history, culture, and identity. Each chapter proposes a distinctive theoretical approach to the syncretism of same-sex desire; Chapter 2, for instance, applies A. K. Ramanujan's theory of context-sensitivity to the work of Kamala Das, while Chapter 3 argues that Vikram Seth's syncretic portrayals of male–male love alternate between elliptical and declamatory modes. Before proceeding to these analyses, the historical trajectory of "syncretism" requires elaboration.

One of the first extant usages of "syncretism" occurs in Plutarch's essay "On Brotherly Love" ("*Peri Philadelphias*") in the *Moralia*, written in the first century CE, where it signifies the Cretan practice of individuals uniting against a common foe despite past conflicts and differences. In the seventeenth century the charge of "syncretism" was leveled against the Lutheran theologian Georg Calixtus (1586–1656), who prescribed the unification of the Protestant denominations and, eventually, their reconvergence with the Catholic Church. While some embraced the salvific potential of syncretism, others considered it heretical, and a series of inflammatory controversies ensued. By the nineteenth century and Britain's increasingly aggressive colonial expansion in Africa and South Asia, the term was used with almost unanimously negative connotations to describe the changes suffered by European Christianity as it was indigenized by the "natives." In the twentieth century "syncretism" began to be invoked with positive overtones by anthropologists, and its present-day application in fields like postcolonial studies and comparative religion is generally neutral or affirmative.[52]

The etymology of "syncretism" makes it a peculiarly apposite term for the phenomena identified in this study. Although many consider that it should "be reserved for describing interactions in the sphere of religion,"[53] this relies on suppressing or ignoring the Ancient Greek usage to denote the importance of homosocial bonds in wartime, as elaborated by Plutarch:

> We must . . . associate familiarly with our brothers' friends, but avoid and shun all intimacy with their enemies, imitating in this point, at least, the practice of Cretans, who, though they often quarrelled with and warred

> against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this it was they called "syncretism."[54]

This definition is frequently mentioned *en passant*, but it has rarely been used to theorize the concept. Plutarch's syncretism is informed by his theme of *philia*[55] between brothers, which he depicts as an intense and indispensable affection/love. By incorporating familiarity and intimacy with one's brother's friends into his disquisition on proper fraternal *philia*, and using "syncretism" to indicate the importance of such alliances in wartime, Plutarch suggests the necessity of a male homosocial continuum founded on affection/love. It is true that *erōs*,[56] which would connote romantic and possibly sexual connections, is absent here, but in Plutarch's oeuvre *philia* and *erōs* are not always discrete. For instance, in his "Life of Polipidas," the Sacred Band, a Theban regiment composed of pairs of male lovers, is described in a manner that recalls the role played by *philia* in syncretism:

> Some say that this band was composed of lovers and beloved (*ex erastōn kai erōmenōn*) . . . a band that is held together by the friendship between lovers (*erōtikēs philias*) is indissoluble and not to be broken . . . , since both stand firm in danger in order to protect each other . . . men have more regard for their lovers even when absent than for others who are present.[57]

It is the image of uniting against a common foe as a result of male–male affection/love, whether this be asexually fraternal or markedly "homoerotic," which invites analogies with the practice of syncretism. In this example, as in several passages from Plutarch's famous treatise on love, the "Erotikos," *philia* overlaps with *erōs* between men.[58]

This meaning of syncretism, with its insistence on *philia* as the foundation of homosocial unity and its parallels with Plutarchan male–male *erōs*, is clearly relevant to my own deployment of the term in the realm of same-sex desire. If women are glaringly absent from Plutarch's analysis, this does not prevent a strategic reinterpretation of his vision of male–male love and unity to include female–female attachments. Foregrounding Plutarch's usage dislodges the more doctrinaire stipulations that "syncretism" solely be applied to the study of comparative religion, also providing a dialectical model for how individuals and individual subjectivities (in Plutarch, brothers and their friends) interact with institutions (the apparatus of war) through the process of syncretism. By contrast, accounts of "syncretic religions" since the 1600s have customarily considered religious institutions to be autonomous entities independent of human agency and cognition.

Yet "syncretism" as a signifier of religious intermixture is not to be dismissed; if theorizing this term with reference to Plutarch and applying it outside the Euro-American context might seem problematic, it has been used for many years in India to describe the overlapping of religions like Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism. With the rise of right-wing Hindu and Muslim factionalism, the proliferation of studies of syncretism can be seen as an attempt to dispel the essentialism and myth-making upholding claims that one religion enjoys greater purity and authenticity than another. In one such study, N. K. Das refers to the "elusive and synthesized character of Indian civilization," which he sees as a means of destabilizing "the falsity of the presupposed singleness of religious allegiance of the adherents."[59] Ram Puniyani also avers, "The struggle against communalism requires a multi-pronged, multi-layered response . . . the promotion of a syncretic culture has to be given utmost importance as it can act as a glue that connects communities with different identities, religious ones in particular."[60] Neither Das nor Puniyani acknowledges that syncretism implies a prior period of religious purity before the onset of intermingling, and thus a gilded, uniformly Hindu or Muslim past. Similarly, Chris Berry and Fran Martin's justification for preferring "syncretistic" to "hybrid" because the latter "risks assuming the pure origins of the hybridized elements"[61] overlooks the disdainful colonial usage of "syncretism" to reproach the "natives" for apparently bastardizing a previously "pristine" Christianity.

The mythologizing and monolithic dimensions of "hybridity" or "syncretism," if addressed carefully, expand their capacity to combat cultural essentialism. Ratna Kapur suggests that "hybridity" is a useful means of undermining the essentialist worldviews so often mobilized in the sexuality debates in India, which tend to rely on the myth of either a sexually chaste or sexually permissive Indian past. Unexpectedly, both conservatives who revile the legitimization of homosexuality and liberals who demand it substantiate their claims by referring to a precolonial period of cultural purity which is always already Hindu. Similarly, some Indian Muslims excoriate the beliefs of Hindus while questioning their sexuality.[62] Here "syncretic" seems more germane than "hybrid" because it is able to participate in this process of religious mythologizing, denouncing such arguments within the parameters of their own logic. Using "syncretism" with reference to same-sex desire gestures toward the impossibility of recuperating a culturally "pure" subject from the Indian or Euro-American past, simultaneously

recognizing the differences and correspondences of sexualities in these two regions, as well as those between and adjacent to them.

Identitarian and Sociocultural Syncretism

In the Euro-American milieu, as Eve Sedgwick has observed,[63] one account of sexual difference, that of homosexual versus heterosexual, has been endowed with the power to describe most manifestations of sexuality; while other narratives do exist, they are less visible. Yet in India, "gay" identity overlaps more perceptibly with other nonnormative sexual and gender identities like those of *kothis*, *panthis*, and *hijras*. To give a literary example, Yudi, the protagonist of Raj Rao's novel *The Boyfriend*, claims to be "radically gay,"[64] but he is also exposed to the belief of his lovers that, as a passive partner in anal intercourse, he is tantamount to a *hijra*. In this instance his gay identity is partly informed by the identifications of those "working class," non-English-speaking men whom he has sex with. Rao implies throughout the novel that the latter neither claim nor recognize the Anglophone term "gay," instead aligning themselves with "local" sexual and gender practices and identities.

What we might call "identitarian syncretism" also describes moments of ambiguity where same-sex desire ossifies into an orientation whose geopolitical provenance remains unvoiced. In *Sancharram*, the words of the *Kakkathi*, a Keralite fortune-teller portrayed as the repository of the "local," simultaneously evoke the possibility of traditional Malayali conceptions of an identitarian core premised on female–female desire and essentialist accounts of lesbianism. This syncretism is partly informed by the biography of the writer and director of the film, Ligy J. Pullappally, who has lived in Kerala and the United States of America, where she has participated in gay and lesbian activism. As a literary analogue, Kamala Das's writing privileges and deprivileges apparently contradictory formulations of sex and sexuality without any enduring assessment of their value, while Vikram Seth's poetry and prose are imbrued with "gay" identity *as well as* alternatives which have been articulated and theorized for far longer in India.

Sexual syncretism often materializes when modernity dialogizes with the past, containing as it does both taxonomies of same-sex love and sociocultural institutions which structure present-day identities diachronically. What does it mean, for instance, if gay existence is informed by the legacy of casteism on the subcontinent? In *The*

Boyfriend, Raj Rao attempts to answer this question. Emphasizing this dialogue proffers a corrective to those who reject India's sexual "backwardness" at the same time as lauding putative indices of development like gay and lesbian politics, often with no awareness of the material and historical situatedness of these signifiers of homosexuality, and those who dismiss their proliferation in the "Global South" as extraneous and neocolonial. Such analyses lack the diachronic sensibility that pervades the texts and films themselves. When an initially Euro-American concept like "homosexual" is made to encapsulate all Indian narratives and embodiments of same-sex desire, there follows a cultural amnesia similar to that which succeeded British colonialism. Instead, the phrase "sexual syncretism" describes a reconciliation and a vortex of understandings of the self which remain synecdochic for their discrete origins, highlighting the expression of different same-sex desires and their genealogies without privileging the modern over the premodern or the "foreign" over the "local." If texts like Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* use the term "gay" to describe a man born and brought up in Mumbai, this reading strategy would not identify an alien inscription on a national *tabula rasa*, because Rao portrays gay identity as the ever-changing product of Euro-American and Indian history.

Same-Sex Desire in Indian Literature and Film: A Brief History

The syncretism of modern Indian formations of same-sex desire and the imperative for a diachronic analytical approach emerge from even a swift perusal of its literary representation in South Asian history. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai's influential work *Same-Sex Love in India*[65] attests to the fact that same-sex relations have been written about in the region for more than three millennia. Starting with ideals of friendship in the *Rig Veda* (approx. 1500–1200 BCE), Vanita and Kidwai trace the history of same-sex love through the Sanskritic and Perso-Urdu literary traditions. Vanita cites many early examples in Sanskrit, including the *Arthashastra* (approx. 100 BCE to 300 CE) and the *Manusmrti* (*Laws of Manu*, approx. 200 BCE to 200 CE), two foundational texts for Hindu thought and law. In these works, she argues, the punishment for same-sex sexual acts is relatively light.[66] Analyzing roughly the same period, Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet identify detailed explorations of the *tritiya prakrti* ("third nature," often translated as "third sex") in the various religious doctrines of South Asia, including those of Hinduism and Buddhism.[67] In an earlier monograph, beginning in the fourth century BCE, they map the genealogy of a complex sexual

and gender taxonomy created for the initiation of monks into Jain monastic orders, concluding:

> The Jain explanation of same-sex orientation as "female sexuality" in a biological male, or male sexuality in a biological female, is quite analogous to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sexologists' understanding of "the homosexual" as "a female soul in a male body," or vice versa. The Jains' ability to differentiate between a psychological sexuality or sexual orientation and biological sex foreshadows the complex typologies of modern sexological theory, with the proliferation of categories such as gender role, sexual identity, sexual orientation, and genetic and morphologic sex, which may or may not be mutually commensurate. Their attribution of distinct biological and "genetic" (i.e., karmic) causes for the three types of sexuality implies that there is a unified entity that is the source of sexual expression, a hallmark of sexuality in its modern sense.[68]

While they perhaps overstate the connection between the taxonomies of Ancient India and those of "modern sexological theory," Zwilling and Sweet do adduce the many terms historically available to describe human beings (principally men, for women were predictably marginalized in the religious literature) as the possessors of an essential sexual orientation. This visibility and legibility is opposed to the usual contention that many indeterminate sexual proclivities were subsumed by gender categories like the *tritiya prakrti*.

Another significant early text is Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*,[69] composed in Sanskrit around the second century CE, in which, as Sudhir Kakar and Wendy Doniger note, "It is possible to excavate several alternative sexualities latent in the . . . somewhat fuzzy boundaries between homoeroticism and heteroeroticism."[70] The *Kamasutra*, like many South Asian texts before it, considers men who desire men to pertain to the *tritiya prakrti*, a morphology that privileges gender over sexuality. Typically, members of the *tritiya prakrti* perform oral sex on one another, which Vatsyayana describes in a nonjudgmental and erotic manner, although anal sex between men is unmentioned in this context. The *Kamasutra* also suggests that male–male desire is separable from a predominantly gender-based morphology, and the *tritiya prakrti* may take the form of a masculine man who desires men, despite the fact that he is still described using feminine pronouns, who makes a living as a "masseuse" and is able to conceal his identity until he ascertains whether or not other men reciprocate his urges.[71] Vatsyayana's verses on oral sex further illuminate the relationship between "sexuality" and gender:

> Even young men, servants
> who wear polished earrings,
> indulge in oral sex
> only with certain men.
> And, in the same way, certain men-about-town
> who care for one another's welfare
> and have established trust
> do this service for one another.[72]

What Doniger and Kakar translate as "men-about-town" (*nagarika*, the normative, named agents of most of the sexual acts prescribed in the *Kamasutra*) are distinguishable from the *tritiya prakrti*; the former are referred to using masculine pronouns, while the latter are grammatically feminine. Here the *nagarika*'s predilections suggest, recalling the arguments of Zwilling and Sweet, that nonnormative sexuality is separable from nonnormative gender. Yet Vatsyayana sees love between women as more situational: "The women of the harem cannot meet men, because they are carefully guarded; and since they have only one husband shared by many women in common, they are not satisfied. Therefore they give pleasure to one another."[73] He catalogues the sexual practices of these women without seeing them as constitutive of identity, a bias that has prevailed on the subcontinent, where male–male desire has attracted identitarian labels more frequently than its female counterpart.

The readings of Vanita and Kidwai and Zwilling and Sweet counter the charges made by some Hindu nationalists that "homosexuality" was unknown in India prior to the invasions of the Mughals.[74] Vanita's scholarship frequently recuperates pre-Islamic representations of same-sex desire and suggests its historical acceptability, as in her translation of the *Krittivasa Ramayana*,[75] which charts the origins of the sage Bhagiratha, who was born of two vulvas (*bhagas*), conceived of a sexual union between the two wives of the late Dilipa, ruler of Ayodhya. Similarly, Amara Das Wilhelm and Devdutt Pattanaik[76] have written extensively on gender fluidity and spaces for same-sex desire in Hinduism. One of Pattanaik's numerous examples is the birth of Hanuman, who springs from Shiva's semen when the latter is aroused by Vishnu in his female form, Mohini, as described in the *Agni Purana* (approx. eighth to eleventh century CE). In such analyses, the sexual indeterminacy surrounding these identities and encounters is said to demonstrate Hinduism's nonjudgmental attitude toward the vicissitudes of gender and sexuality.

It would be beyond the scope of this book to give an exhaustive history of Sanskritic representations of same-sex desire in India, but the work of scholars like Vanita, Pattanaik, and Das is emblematic of wider efforts to unearth a subcontinental genealogy of same-sex desire which cannot be subsumed by Euro-American histories of homosexuality. The ideological recourse to a tolerant "Indian tradition" recurs in the literature and film in this study, acting as a corrective to both the Hindu Right and those who deem India's attitudes toward sexual politics unevolved and primitive. Even some of the most celebratory accounts, including Foucault's fantasy of an Oriental *ars erotica*, depend on figuring Asian sexual identities as inchoate and unarticulated.[77] The detailed typologies of ancient religious literature and the *Kamasutra* present evidence to the contrary, although the oft-cited equivalence of "pre-modern Indian" articulations of sexuality and "modern Western" psychosexual taxonomies is problematic. While they share an insistence on specificity, their respective rootedness in religious and secular medical discourse self-evidently suggests different purposes and conceptualizations of the human subject. Sweet's assertion that "Foucault [was] spectacularly wrong" in his claim that "sexuality as we know it today did not exist prior to the bureaucratization of society that accompanied modern capitalism"[78] is precarious, as it overlooks Foucault's painstaking anchoring of his analysis in the nineteenth-century confluence of Western medicine, psychiatry, and law, which led to the discursive "invention" of homosexuality.[79]

Yet *Same-Sex Love in India* does not posit a univocal Hindu tradition; Saleem Kidwai demonstrates how, although the Koran is overtly hostile toward male–male sex acts, they flourished from the beginning of the Mughal Empire in the 1500s to the onset of British moral censure in the nineteenth century. Kidwai invokes famous Muslim lovers like Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (CE 971–1030) and his slave Ayaz,[80] alongside the emperor Jahangir (CE 1569–1627), a ruler of the Mughal Empire known for his love of young slave boys, also focusing on the explicitly homoerotic content of the Urdu *ghazal*, a poetic form comprising rhyming couplets and a refrain, which originated in the Arabic verse of the sixth century CE and entered South Asia in the twelfth century CE. The themes of the *ghazal* are predominantly love, longing, and separation, with the addressee taking the form of the divine male beloved, although he was often palpably human. Najmuddin Shah Mubarak (ca.1683–1733), whose pen name was Abru, promoted both the development of Urdu and

the *ghazal* form itself. Many of his surviving couplets express love between men and boys explicitly; for example: "Jab ki aisā ho gandumī launḍā/Tab gunahgār kyō na ho Adam" ("When there is such a wheat-coloured boy/Then why wouldn't Adam be a sinner?").[81] Kidwai identifies Mir Taqi Mir (CE 1723–1810) as another important writer of "homoerotic" *ghazals*:

> In Mir's *ghazals* (love poems) different male youths, including the sons of Sayyids, Brahmans, Mughals, Turks, gardeners, soldiers, masons, firework makers, washermen, money changers, boatmen, flower sellers, musicians, singers, goldsmiths, physicians, perfumers, and even sons of judges (*qazis*) and law-givers are included among "bazaar boys." Mir's narrative poem "Shola-i Ishq" is an example of a love affair between two males, one Muslim, one Hindu.[82]

Mir's penchant for men has been widely observed; M. Yaqub Mirza notes that he "is said to have been in love with twenty odd boys at least,"[83] evidenced by couplets such as the following: "Terā rukh-e mukhatat qur'ān hai hamārā/ bosā bhī lē to kyā hai īmān hai hamārā" (Your face with the down on it is my Qu'ran/ So what if I kiss it? It is my faith).[84] Metapoetically evoking the delicate meshing of the supernal and concrete for which the *ghazal* is renowned, Mir deliberately distinguishes the boy, whose light dusting of facial hair is to be kissed by an older man, from the divine object of adoration. Similarly, one couplet reads:

> Khīcā bagal mē maī ne jo kal mast pāke rāt
> Kahne laga ki āp ko bhī ab naśa huā
> Finding him drunk, I pulled him close to me last night.
> He said, "So you too have become intoxicated now."[85]

The couplet may signify that the literally drunk—"*mast*"—boy beloved yields to Mir's metaphorical amorous intoxication—"*naśa*"—but these two planes are not so easily separated, for both terms have literal and metaphorical meanings. Among other interpretations, "*mast*" might mean drunk or excited, "*naśa*" intoxication or mania. Despite their levity, then, these lines are emblematic of the *ghazal's* heightened ability to evoke the constant interplay of physical and metaphysical connections between male lovers. Both substantively and as an influence on the *ghazal*, the literature of Sufism, which foregrounded personal devotion to a male God, often employed "homoerotic metaphors."[86] Christopher Shackle has remarked that

Sufi Islam in South Asia evinced "an extraordinarily exalted idealisation of love, sometimes exotically manifested in homoerotic attachments which often contravened the norms of religious identity."[87] Moreover, Sufism's similarities and cross-fertilization with Bhakti,[88] a medieval devotional strain of Hinduism with its own corpus of adoring poetry, should not be overlooked.

Carla Petievich[89] and Ruth Vanita have shown the importance of *rekhta* and *rekhti*. Vanita defines the former as "mainstream Urdu poetry with a male speaker,"[90] which from the mid-1700s to the mid-1800s included depictions of male–female and male–male desire. The latter was a poetic genre prevalent during this period, revolving around "women speakers and . . . relations between women, relegating men to the periphery of the poetic universe."[91] *Rekhti* attempted to replicate women's idiom, especially that of courtesans, and "Female-female relationships [became] virtually a hallmark"[92] of its Lucknowi incarnation. Several critics have argued that because *rekhti* was written primarily by men and for men, it marginalized women's experience, but Vanita charts the inevitable seepage of their real-life voices into such poetry. Both "respectable" women and courtesans had considerable exposure to these poems at public recitals and in the home, controverting the earlier charge that they were merely exclusionary.[93] *Rekhti* contains a rich taxonomy of identities pertaining to female–female relationships, such as *dogana* and *zanakhi*, which "indicate . . . intimacy [and] extend to eroticism."[94] Denotations of female–female sexual practices include *chapti* (rubbing) and *chapatbaz* (a woman who "rubs," or has sex with, other women). That these terms remain in use among courtesans is demonstrated by Veena Talwar Oldenburg in her illuminating study of the *tawa'ifs* (female entertainers and courtesans) of Lucknow. It is a measure of these women's colonial and postcolonial suppression, paralleling that of *rekhti* poetry, that this terminology has not achieved wider political currency. While the present-day *kotha* (salon) is more public than the domestic home, the sexual relationships between its denizens, as Talwar Oldenburg clarifies, remain private.[95] It is injudicious, then, to claim that love and sex between women have never attracted "local" identitarian definition. It was only when *rekhti* and the world from which it emanated aroused colonial and critical condemnation that the process of silencing and excision began. The marginalization of the *tawa'ifs* and *rekhti* foreshadows the elusiveness of "local" nomenclatures of female–female desire in modernity, partly owing to the widespread patriarchal insistence on the unspeakability of women's sexuality.

Islamic traditions of slavery and the harem permitted many rulers to derive sexual pleasure from both men and women, and the harem itself, a female-only space, was guarded by eunuchs/*hijras* because they were considered above sexual suspicion. Other single-sex domains with an explicitly sexual purpose included male brothels, which appear in the literature of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. These traditions, along with the "homoeroticism" of the *ghazal*, *rekhti*, and Sufism, were dismissed as deplorable by the British colonials of the nineteenth century. After the quelling of the "Indian Mutiny" in 1857 and the official inclusion of the territory in the British Empire, India became the target of a series of morality campaigns,[96] in part precipitated by sudden fears of miscegenation between the colonizers and the "natives." In subsequent years, as Christopher Lane remarks, "Britain's administrative power over international policy meant that London could disseminate orders for sexual restraint across Britain's colonies with relative ease, regulating local administrations by punitive measures and threats of dismissal."[97] What Vanita and Kidwai regard as a generally tolerant attitude was superseded by the British intolerance of same-sex desire, epitomized by Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, popularly dubbed the "Anti-Sodomy Law," which was introduced in 1860. Drafted by Lord Macaulay and the Indian Law Commission as part of the "modernization" campaigns of Dalhousie, the previous governor general of India, Section 377 is as follows:

> Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall be liable to fine.

The appended explanation reads, "Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence," and the Comment adds, "This section is intended to punish the offense of sodomy, buggery and bestiality."[98] The law heralded an importation into India of British conceptions of same-sex desire as an abnormality or illness, as well as the increasing dichotomization of British purity and Indian licentiousness, which helped to justify the civilizing mission. Stanley Wolpert notes that Britain's spurious theories of the effeminate and martial races of India, most commonly cited as the Bengalis and Sikhs respectively, were based on "disloyalty" and "loyalty" to the British during the "Sepoy Rebellion" of 1857. Focusing on the late nineteenth century, Mrinalini Sinha asserts that an imagined link between male

femininity and "sodomy" coexisted with the belief that it was the "masculine" and "virile" peoples of India who were inclined toward same-sex sexual acts.[99] By drawing on male-male desire as a useful trope for degeneracy in an ambience of Victorian Puritanism, the British were able to morally vindicate the repression of both the "manly" (read hypersexed) and "effeminate" (read sexually deviant) races. This was part of a more general rejection of "barbaric customs," including *sati* (a widow's self-sacrifice on her husband's funeral pyre) and child marriage, which were held as signs of India's inferiority to Britain.[100]

British prejudices did not remain external or oppositional to Indian thought; on the contrary, they were internalized, and, as Vanita and Kidwai note, they:

> had a major influence on the social reform movements that developed in many Indian communities in the nineteenth century and later on nationalist movements as well . . . social reformers tried to form an Ideal Indian man, woman, child, and family, largely on the model of the British Victorian nuclear family.[101]

Referring to Indians' horrified reaction to Katherine Mayo's claims in her infamous treatise, *Mother India*, published in 1927, that "homosexuality" was rife among them, Vanita and Kidwai locate the beginnings of the "new homophobia" in nationalists' rejoinders either that homosexuality did not exist in the region or that it was an import and antithetical to "Indian culture." Yet this "homophobia" was almost always ambivalent, especially as manifested in literature. While "homosexuality" was expurgated from the accepted canon of Urdu poetry,[102] and numerous alarmist "homophobic" texts emerged, many authors and readers regaled themselves with its pleasures, even while ostensibly dismissing it. For instance, Pandey Bechan Sharma ("Ugra") published a collection of Hindi short stories in 1927, *Cākaleṭ*, most of which seem to denounce the love of men for boys. In the title story, "*cākaleṭ*" (chocolate) is glossed by one of the characters:

> Acchā, spaṣṭ suno, cākaleṭ ki paribhāṣā yād kar lo . . . cākaleṭ deś ke un bhole-bhāle, kamsin aur sundar laṛkō ko kahte haī, jinhē samāj ke rākṣas āpnī "vāsnā" kī tripti ke lie sarvnāś ke mukh mē ḍhakelte haī . . . Hamāre yukt pradeś ke log inhē "cākaleṭ," "pāket-buk" ādi nāmopnāmō se yād karte haī. Inke anek upnām aise bhī haī jinhē samya-bhāshā likh nahī̃ saktī hai.
>
> Okay, listen carefully, remember this definition of "*cākaleṭ*". The name "*cākaleṭ*" is given to those innocent, young and beautiful boys of our country whom the demons of society shove into the mouth of destruction for

> the gratification of their "lust" . . . The people of our United Provinces call them "*cākaleṭ*" and "*pāket-buk*" . . . There are also plenty of nicknames for them which cannot be written in language fit for good company.[103]

At first glance, this description is homophobic, but it is also profoundly equivocal; if the use of the tantalizing English-language "chocolate" to describe the young boys seems to align male–male sexual desires with the debauched Anglophone West, the latter eludes binarization with a pure incorruptible India because "*cākaleṭ*" represents the Hindiization and sexualization of an "innocent" British word. By leaving the provenance of "language fit for good company" (*samya-bhāshā*) indistinct, Ugra implies that Hindi, English, and the other Indian languages might all contain coarse terms to describe adult men and their relationships with "beautiful boys" ("*sundar laṛkō*"). The colloquial Hindi term *gandu*, or one who has his anus taken, is just one example.

"Homophobia" continued throughout the twentieth century and found ample expression in literature, such as the conflation of homosexuality and perversion in Vaikom Muhammad Basheer's Malayalam novel *Shabdangal* (*Voices*, 1947) and Kamleshwar's *Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan* (*One Road, Fifty-Seven Lanes*, 1956). In the latter work, the young Shivraj is taken in by the much older Sarnam Singh, who is a known dacoit, and the two have a sexual relationship. Midway through the novel Shivraj wonders, after awakening next to Sarnam Singh, "Ākhir yah sneh yah pyār kaisa hotā hai, is mẽ durgandh kyō āti hai? Is ki sīmā kahā̃ tak hai?" ("In the end, this affection, this love . . . what's it like? Why does it stink? Where is its limit?").[104] Shivraj finds it difficult to describe his love for Sarnam, using the hesitant "*sneh*" ("affection/fondness") before alighting on the more profound and far-reaching "*pyār*" ("love"). This moment couples a stereotypical rejection of male–male love, distilled into the term "*durgandh*" ("stench"), with an implicit recognition of its complexity, its worthiness of interrogation, and the possibility that, like its male–female counterpart, it is life-defining. Such ambivalence has been reflected in conservative derogations and the marketing of the novel; male–male desire is a minor theme, but it is invariably represented as a central "homosexuality" in both discourses, indicating the power of the privileged term and its transgressive connotations to entice and offend. Ismat Chughtai's short story "*Lihaf*" ("The Quilt," 1941), like Kamleshwar's novel, aroused public outrage with its unambiguous depiction of same-sex desire, in this instance between two women. Paralleling the trial of Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* in 1928,

Chughtai was indicted for obscenity on account of her portrayal of "lesbianism" in "*Lihaf*," despite the fact that her description of the sexual relationship between Begum Jaan and Rabbu, her maidservant, is an exercise in terminological evasion. This refusal to name was central in the defense of Chughtai's lawyer that the story could only be understood by those who already had some experience of "lesbianism." Once again, the privileged term "lesbian" was more threatening than the author's suggestive evocation of an unspecified female–female eroticism, and this transmutation of the unnamed in Urdu into an essential Anglophone psychosexual orientation for the purpose of litigation is a classic example of the Foucaultian discursive production of sexuality. And yet the resultant term "lesbian" remained troublingly syncretic owing to its origins in Urdu descriptions and conceptualizations of sex between women. If nothing else, Chughtai's trial indicates the primacy of condemnatory essentialist colonial discourses of homosexuality and lesbianism, which continue to refract representations and interpretations of same-sex desire in twenty-first-century India.

Another famous writer from the Progressive Writers' Association,[105] Sada'at Hussain Manto, has remarked that Chughtai refused to comment when he quizzed her on the last line of her story:

> I was going to say something but just then I looked at her face. There I saw the kind of embarrassment that overwhelms common, homely girls when they hear something unspeakable. I felt greatly disappointed because I wanted to have a detailed discussion with her about "Lihaf."[106]

Chughtai's reaction is redolent of the colonial and postcolonial conspiracy of silence maintained around same-sex desire with which this Introduction began—while it obviously occurred, it was not often acknowledged. The author's reticence about the text also echoes how the story of "*Lihaf*" itself invokes sex between women both for its scandalous pleasures and in order to jettison it. The lovemaking between Begum Jaan and Rabbu which takes place under the *lihaf* arouses fascination and disgust in the (dis)ingenuous child observing them: although she compares the movements of the quilt to the terrifying swaying of an elephant, she is also intent on witnessing the noisy activities taking place beneath it, which are metaphorized as the consumption of delicious food.[107] One more recent example of this admixture of lust and loathing is Shobha Dé's novel *Strange Obsession*, in which the lesbian protagonist, Meenakshi, or Minx, is portrayed using bestial imagery. Like Ugra's "*cākaleṭ*," Minx's debauchery is associated with the "West," synecdochically rendered by her short hair

and foreign cigarettes, but the purpose of her "deviant" sexuality is also to give pleasure to Dé's predominantly Indian readership, and the synopsis on the back cover of the 1992 Penguin India paperback describes the work as "an unforgettable novel of sexual obsession and its calamitous consequences."[108]

Key events of the early 1990s include the inauguration of *Bombay Dost*, India's first magazine to be registered as LGBT, which took its place in the vanguard of rapidly changing attitudes toward same-sex relationships. In 1992, a protest mounted by the ABVA (*AIDS Bedbhav Virodhi Andolan*/AIDS Anti-Discrimination Movement) outside the Delhi Police Headquarters was widely publicized. It was the ABVA who filed the first petition against Section 377, as well as publishing *Less than Gay: A Citizens' Report*,[109] which contained testimonies and recapitulated the available literature on homosexuality. Sunita Singh et al. underline the unique importance of this document,[110] which is sometimes overlooked in histories of the gay and lesbian rights movement in India. In 1998, with the hue and cry surrounding Deepa Mehta's film *Fire*, which I discuss in Chapter 1, lesbianism became the focus of widespread public debate.

Since 1991, with P. V. Narasimha Rao's policy of pro-market structural reforms and trade liberalization, assisted by then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, many affirmative portrayals of homosexuality have emerged. With increasing consumerism and foreign investment came international advertising, satellite television, and, later, the Internet. Shohini Ghosh provides a useful analysis of the synergies between these media:

> This new and accelerated flow of images into urban middle-class homes triggered both hope and anxiety. The popular discourse around the "opening of the skies" was replete with combative imagery that frequently used expressions like "assault," "onslaught," and invasion. Consequently, satellite TV was seen to cause deviant acts while eroding the "culture and tradition" of India.[111]

Despite the fears of many conservative custodians of India's "culture and tradition," satellite television gave viewers access to representations of homosexuality in films, dramas, and chat shows, and the impact of terrestrial channels, too, should not be underestimated. In recent years, soaps like *Maryada, Lekin Kab Tak?* (*Keeping Our Limits . . . But Until When?*)[112] have contained storylines involving male–male and female–female love, while the Internet has enabled "gay" men and women

across India to chat, form discussion groups, and join web lists such as *Khush*, all of which provided support and a nascent sense of collective identity. Throughout the 1990s, there was a proliferation of gay friendship networks, but these were generally restricted to the middle and upper classes. Organizations targeting MSMs and *hijras*, by contrast, often revolved around HIV awareness and prevention. The Humsafar Trust, founded by Ashok Row Kavi, initially supported the term "gay" and rejected "*kothi*," but the latter was eventually embraced, to some extent because of the requirements of HIV/AIDS funding bodies, who favor "indigenous" labels over "imported" ones (see Lawrence Cohen, 2005). It is ironic that this increased sexual liberalism has partially emerged from Euro-American cultural forms, especially as depicted on television, and is often combined with uncritical admiration for "Western tolerance," when it was the British colonial powers who oversaw the dispersal of homophobia across India for many decades and left a legacy of condemnation in their wake.

In literature, love and sex between men, and to a lesser extent between women, are increasingly represented. In 1976 Kamala Das published her autobiographical *My Story*, self-translated from the Malayalam *Ente Katha*, which contains an extended description of premarital female–female eroticism. Her Anglophone poetry makes repeated reference to same-sex desire, which is explored more fully in her short stories, namely the English-language "Iqbal" and the Malayalam "*Chandana Marangal*" (1988; "The Sandal Trees," 1995), analyzed in Chapter 2.[113] In the late 1970s Vijayadan Detha, a Rajasthani writer and folklorist, published "*Dovari Joon*" ("A Double Life"). Translated into Hindi as "*Naya Gharvas*" ("A New Domesticity"), the story centers on two women who fall in love and live in a phantasmal palace in the wild, protected from the local village patriarchy by a band of ghosts. When the women first make love, the complicity of nature is suggested by a joyful storm, which implicitly repudiates the conventional charge that sex between women is unnatural.[114] Since the 1980s Suniti Namjoshi, a diasporic writer who has lived in India, the United States of America, Canada, and the United Kingdom, has written from what she calls an "Asian perspective," an "alien perspective," and a "lesbian perspective." Her published works include *Feminist Fables* (1981), *The Conversations of Cow* (1985), and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989).[115] The two latter texts are extended meditations on the connections and divergences of "lesbianism" and "Indianness," but they are not representative of a

wider literary trend. Other fictionalizations of female–female desire are exiguous; they include Manju Kapur's novel *A Married Woman*, which portrays a relationship between an unhappy wife and a widow without resorting to the cliché of situational lesbianism,[116] and Abha Dawesar's *Babyji*.[117]

One important example of writing on female–female desire is the lesbian anthology *Facing the Mirror*, published in 1999. In her introduction, editor Ashwini Sukthankar notes, "We want to claim [the word 'lesbian'] here particularly because it is so uncompromising."[118] Given that many of the individual writers do not embrace this label and perceive themselves to be outside an initially Euro-American politics of homosexuality, the stories, anecdotes, and poems of the collection are syncretized by their refraction through an overarching lesbianism. Evident in the anthology are the oppositional impulses to deem Indian history and experience inimical to female–female desire or lesbianism and to show how these feelings and identities are cemented and rendered intelligible by a specifically Indian reality. The anthology ends with a poem by Qamar Roshanabadi entitled "*Vande Mataram!*," a transformation of the national song into a paean to love and sex between women, whom she claims have been "acquitted" by the words of "the great Vatsyayana himself" in the *Kamasutra*:

> The calf's mouth is pure when it drinks milk;
> the dog's mouth is pure when it seizes game;
> as also the bird's beak when it makes fruit fall;
> and the mouth of a woman in the act of love.[119]

Although there is the familiar recourse to ancient history to justify love and sex between women in modernity, Roshanabadi deliberately elides the context established by Vatsyayana, which is a relativistic catalogue of the attitudes of different South Asian peoples toward the impurity of women who practice *auparishtaka* (mouth congress). As the valedictory work of a lesbian anthology, "*Vande Mataram*" intimates how lesbian identity need not automatically be structured by Euro-American history. If the lesbian consciousness encourages a reappraisal or reclamation of ancient South Asian narratives of gender and sexuality, these narratives in turn redefine what it means to claim a lesbian identity in the modern Indian nation-state, in opposition to those patriarchal nationalist accounts that objectify women as the eulogized yet ultimately voiceless repository of nationhood and

culture. Echoing the concerns of Roshanabadi and *Facing the Mirror*, the recent anthology *Out! Stories from the New Queer India*, edited by Minal Hajratwala, widens the range of stories to incorporate lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lives. In her introduction to this work, Hajratwala writes, "We crack open the almirah to give you a peek," recreating the closet metaphor in Indian English and anticipating the syncretic portrayals of nonnormative genders and sexualities that permeate the collection.[120]

The most acclaimed Indian writer to portray male–male desire is Vikram Seth, whose poetry contains occasional meditations on love and sex between men and the author's self-declared bisexuality. His 1986 novel in verse, *The Golden Gate*, incorporates a gay relationship in 1980s San Francisco, while *A Suitable Boy*,[121] published in 1993, is more elliptical in its evocation of male–male desire. Paralleling *Facing the Mirror*, these identities and practices are made intelligible by South Asian history, as enunciated in Chapter 3. Raj Rao, author of *Bomgay*, *The Boyfriend*, and *Hostel Room 131*,[122] tackles this theme in analogous ways, as explored in Chapter 4. Among the less prominent Anglophone novels dealing with male–male desire are Leslie De Noronha's *Dewdrop Inn*, Makarand Paranjape's *The Narrator*, and P Parivaraj's *Shiva and Arun*,[123] which was only published outside India because of its sexual explicitness. Hoshang Merchant and Agha Shahid Ali are two of the most famous poets to have treated love between men at length; if Merchant's work brings a neoclassical sensibility to bear on male–male desire in India, Ali's literary conceptualization of a perceptibly North American gay identity overlaps with histories of the Urdu *ghazal* and Islamic traditions of "homoeroticism" in the Middle East and South Asia.

Nonresident Indian writers who have created gay characters include Vikram Chandra, whose short story "*Artha*" explores the relationship between Iqbal, the Muslim protagonist and narrator, and his Hindu lover, Rajesh, who vanishes, possibly after being murdered by Bombay's *bhai log* (brother people), early in the narrative.[124] Neel Mukherjee's novel *A Life Apart* echoes "*Artha*," refusing to privilege gay identity and its ramifications as a central narrative concern (see Chapter 4), while Rahul Mehta's short stories in *Quarantine* explore the intersections of diaspora and homosexuality in more conventional ways.[125] More recently, Kunal Mukherjee, a San Francisco-based writer, has published *My Magical Palace*, which moves back and forth between the gay NRI protagonist's life in America and his upbringing in Hyderabad.[126]

Prior to the 1990s, in Indian film same-sex desire was occasionally depicted but remained unlabeled, as in *Badnam Basti* (*Infamous Neighbourhood*), an adaptation of Kamleshwar's *Ek Sadak Sattavan Galiyan*, which alludes to the relationship between its two male protagonists without invoking identity categories. Similarly, *Razia Sultan* contains a famous song sequence, "*Khwab Bankar Koi Aayega*" ("Someone Will Come in a Dream"), which visually portrays Razia's (Hema Malini) implicitly sexual relationship with her female confidante, Khakun (Parveen Babi), while refusing to verbalize it. In this scene, Razia and Khakun are on a pleasure barge within the palace. Razia lies prostrate, her hand clutched in Khakun's, as the latter coos to her erotically. When Khakun bends close to Razia in a position suggestive of a kiss, this is obscured from the audience by a raised fan, and one of the two girls rowing places her finger over her mouth to emphasize secrecy. The sequence proved so disquieting that "*Khwab Bankar Koi Aayega*" was cut from many releases of the film.[127] More unambiguously, the Marathi film *Umbartha* (*Threshold*),[128] which was roughly contemporaneous with *Razia Sultan*, explores a relationship between two women in a remand home with some sympathy.

It was during the 1990s that homosexuality began to be articulated explicitly, as in the Bollywood film *Mast Kalandar* (*Joyous Saint*),[129] which features a stereotyped "gay" character named Pinku (Anupam Kher), whom Thomas Waugh views as a "relatively harmless second-string villain,"[130] although more aptly his depiction connotes directorial homophobia. Gay individuals also appear in films from the art, parallel, and diasporic cinemas; for example, Kaizad Gustad's *Bombay Boys* incorporates a Parsi who travels to India to explore his "homosexuality," and *Bomgay*,[131] a series of vignettes based on Raj Rao's poetry and directed by Riyad Vinci Wadia, focuses on love and sex between men, but it has mostly been screened on the international festival circuit. Since the late 1990s several films portraying South Asian gay and lesbian characters in diasporic settings have appeared. Unfolding in New York, *Chutney Popcorn* depicts the life of the second-generation lesbian Reena (Nisha Ganatra), who acts as a surrogate for her infertile sister, Sarita (Sakina Jaffrey). Its themes parallel those of *A Touch of Pink* and *Nina's Heavenly Delights*,[132] which represent the conflict between an apparently beleaguered Indianness and the wayward, often explicitly Westernized sexuality of their protagonists. In all three films, the reincorporation of the lesbian or gay protagonist into the

biological family overlaps with homosexual self-assertion and individuation, thus engendering gay and lesbian identities that defy automatic insertion into normative Euro-American narratives of establishing separatist queer communities. More orthodox in Euro-American terms is *I Can't Think Straight*,[133] which depicts "coming out" as a movement away from the diasporic home.

Over the last fifteen years, depictions of male–male desire in popular Indian cinema have proliferated,[134] although its female counterpart is generally limited to alarmist and phobic representations like Karan Razdan's *Girlfriend* and Shrey Srivastava's *Men Not Allowed*,[135] both of which pathologize "lesbianism." In these two films the protagonists' sexual relationship is explicitly linked to the fact that as children they were sexually abused by men. *Dedh Ishqiya*, released in 2014, is far more sympathetic, implying love and sex between women partly through visual and verbal references to Ismat Chughtai's "*Lihaf*" ("The Quilt"), hovering, like its literary predecessor, between concealment and disclosure.[136] With its explicit representation of the romance between two Malayali teenage girls, Ligy Pullappally's *Sancharram* provides a stark contrast, doubtlessly reflecting its distinct provenance in the diasporic art cinema (see Chapter 1). Popular films thematizing male–male desire are variously affirmative, condemnatory, or ambivalent. As I explore in Chapter 5, Onir's *My Brother Nikhil*, Amol Palekar's *Quest*, and Sridhar Rangayan's *68 Pages*, all of which were produced prior to the reading down of Section 377 in 2009 (see below), depict male–male desire and homosexuality sympathetically. In opposition, unequivocally detrimental representations include *Teen Deewarein*, which paints an HIV-positive rapist's homosexuality as pathological, and *Vettaiyadu Vilaiyadu*, which connects homicidal proclivities to homosexuality. More ambivalently, *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana*[137] present a simulacrum of gay identity for humorous effect. Set in the United States but destined primarily for audiences in India, these films maximize the comic potential of the reactions of characters who misread the relationship between the male protagonists as homosexual. Unsurprisingly, both films exploit the commercial usefulness of homosexuality as pleasurable exoticism without posing a serious threat to heterosexual institutions. Shohini Ghosh has dubbed these strategies "phobic" and "erotic,"[138] a summation that could be extended to much of the literature already discussed. Diverging from these ambiguous narratives, post-2009 popular films like *Dunno Y—Na Jaane Kyun*[139] often treat "homosexuality" at great length and accept it categorically,

just as Onir's "I am Omar," the last of four shorts in his feature *I Am* (2010–2011),[140] deals with the prejudice faced by men who have sex with men in the years of Section 377, suggesting the pleasures of such relations in a pared-down narrative.

The recently deceased Rituparno Ghosh both directed and acted in several Bengali-language films focusing on homosexuality and male–male desire. *Arekti Premer Golpo* stars Ghosh as transgender documentary maker Abhiroop Sen and Indraneil Sengupta as his bisexual lover, foregrounding the nonnormative gender and sexual self-expression of Abhiroop and the *jatra* actor on whom he is making a documentary, Chapal Bhaduri. Written and directed by Ghosh, *Chitrangada: The Crowning Wish* follows the sex change of choreographer Rudra Chatterjee (Ghosh), precipitated by his love affair with Partho (Jishu Sengupta). *Memories in March* features Ghosh as the gay male protagonist, Ornub Mitra, whose boyfriend, Siddhartha, dies in a car accident. Focalizing Siddhartha's mother's (Arati Mishra, Deepti Naval) realization that her son was gay, the film involves her in numerous conversations on homosexuality with Ornub. The first short of the 2013 anthology *Bombay Talkies*, *Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh*,[141] is directed by Karan Johar and depicts the encounter of the openly gay Avinash (Saqib Saleem) with the married Dev (Randeep Hooda), culminating in a passionate kiss and later anatomizing the dissolution of Dev's marriage. Leaving *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana* behind, Johar locates a sympathetically drawn and psychologically complex homosexuality in India itself, perhaps reflecting changing directorial and public attitudes and perhaps the films' divergent audiences and distribution.

It is self-evident that literature and film reflect and contribute to public and state narratives of same-sex desire, but the consumers of Anglophone literature and Bollywood cinema, while not mutually exclusive, are distinct. If the Indian novel in English necessarily circulates among the Anglophone middle and upper classes, popular Hindi cinema is more widely accessible, as affirmed by cultural critics like Ashis Nandy and Fareed Kazmi,[142] both of whom view Bollywood as a manifestation of sociopolitical and cultural mores pertaining to a wide range of demographic groups. It should come as no surprise, then, that *Dunno Y—Na Jaane Kyun* was released in 2010, one year after the reading down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code by the Delhi High Court, as a result of a lengthy petition orchestrated by the Naz Foundation. After July 2009 there was indeed greater openness toward "homosexuality," both in terms of fundamental rights and

cultural production, but this was overshadowed by the reinstatement of the law in late 2013, after the Supreme Court's ruling that the Delhi High Court's decision was unlawful. At present it is too early to speculate on the long-term cultural effects of the return of Section 377, but it is a widely acknowledged portent of the increasing sexual conservatism presided over by Narendra Modi's BJP-led government.

A Caveat

While many scholars have denounced Orientalist accounts of "Asian eroticism," fewer have explored the objectification and exoticization of "Western sexuality" by the non-West. As part of an appraisal of the secular/spiritual dichotomy so omnipresent in Orientalist narratives, R. Radhakrishnan asks, "In a world structured hierarchically between East and West, developing and developed nations, is the longing of the West for completion by the East somehow considered not as drastic as the longing of the East for completion by the West?"[143] Although this book argues for the fusion, imbrication, and coexistence of homosexuality and other Indian practices and identities of same-sex desire, I am not suggesting that the binary worldview of East and West has been superseded in the popular imagination. In some ways, as Edward Said argues in his 2003 Preface to *Orientalism*, it has been rearticulated and intensified.[144] It is clear that many Bollywood narratives of same-sex desire depend on fantasies of sexual permissiveness and extrovert gay identities in the "West," whether these potentialities be treated phobically, erotically, or with ambivalence. As explored in Chapter 5, the pleasure *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana* gives viewers in India is partly based on the exoticism of "Western" homosexuality, which takes its place beside the Statue of Liberty and the beaches of Miami on the scopophilic tourist trail. But beyond the dyadic *Weltanschauung* which such works promote, they may be forerunners of the further Asianization of sexualities in Euro-America. As another example, Chris Berry has argued that some mainstream "gay" East Asian films do not advocate "coming out" in the Euro-American sense, which usually connotes "not only openness, but . . . a journey outwards towards the realization of full subjecthood," but rather they posit familial reintegration, or "a reconciliation of contradictions and conflict," as the ideal outcome of openly expressing one's "homosexuality."[145] With such syncretic representations circulating on an increasingly international scale, it is possible

that the propagation of sexual politics will evolve into a more egalitarian system of what Arjun Appadurai terms "global flows."[146] But equipoised streams of vernacularization, whereby the sexual practices and identities of different nations circulate globally and are reinvented in different times and places, are still foreclosed by the present cultural and financial hegemony of Euro-America. These issues require a book-length study on their own, and the necessary constraints and elisions of the present work do not imply an underestimation of their significance.

Chapter Summary

Because the primary focus of this book is the representation of narratives and embodiments of same-sex desire in India, I have foregrounded texts that unfold in this region. For this reason I have not included NRI writers like Suniti Namjoshi, whose most famous works, *Feminist Fables* and *The Conversations of Cow*, have a timeless and fabular quality which eclipses their geographical situatedness. The only novel I analyze that takes place outside India, Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*, is interested in how the subjectivity of a male–male desiring Indian living in Britain, Ritwik, is inflected by the temporally and geographically specific Swadeshi movement in Bengal. My selection of Anglophone material includes both widely praised and discussed texts like Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*, and less literary works such as Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend*. Similarly, the films that form the basis of this study include those of the art cinema, represented by Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Ligy Pullappally's *Sancharram*, and more popular Bollywood works like *My Brother Nikhil*. Sridhar Rangayan's films, paralleling Rao's novels, have sometimes been criticized for their shortcomings, but the present schema deliberately comprehends "high" and "low" cultural production, not only in English, but also in Hindi, Malayalam, and Marathi, partly in order to move away from what is often, with a surprising lack of irony, referred to using the oxymoronic phrase "the postcolonial canon," a coterie of novels and poems whose accomplishment has been deemed sufficient for study in Euro-American departments of literature. Suffice it to say that my selection of primary texts and films can only ever be partial, and I apologize in advance for the omissions of this book.

The present study aims to show how the literature and film analyzed embody the syncretism of tradition and modernity, the local and

the foreign, the national and the transnational, which, as I have briefly suggested, inform ideas and embodiments of identities and practices of same-sex desire in India today. The works in question demonstrate that the contemporary phenomenon of syncretic same-sex desire or homosexuality is identitarian, by which is meant the fusion, imbrication, and coexistence of different models of sexual identity, and more broadly culturohistorical, as in the reinvention of an initially Euro-American homosexuality when it comes into contact with Indian cultural forms and is placed in dialogue with the Indian past. As well as highlighting the combination and contiguity of the initially Euro-American and the Indian, the chapters approach sexual syncretism in distinctive ways. Chapter 1 establishes a dialogue between Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Ligy Pullappally's *Sancharram* in order to explore their contrasting attitudes toward the capacity of Indian and Euro-American traditions to express and sanction female–female desire. If *Fire* emphasizes the incompatibility of these traditions, *Sancharram* is more optimistic about the Indian ability to syncretize narratives of love and sex between women. In answer to specific unilateral queer and Indian literary feminist readings of Kamala Das, Chapter 2 uses A. K. Ramanujan's theory of "context-sensitivity" to show how her writing accommodates different conceptions of same-sex desire arising from both "local" Malayali and more universalist Euro-American accounts, which may provide an alternative to fruitless accusations of inconsistency or hypocrisy. Chapter 3 considers Vikram Seth's portrayals of male–male desire in 1980s San Francisco and early 1950s India, relating them to histories of gay liberation, colonial censorship, *nawabi* culture, the *ghazal*, and *yaari*. Although *yaari* may be loosely glossed as friendship, it has a wider resonance that eludes accurate translation into English. My argument is that Seth's alternately elliptical and declamatory representations of love and sex between men are enabled by syncretic combinations of initially Euro-American and other South Asian identities, practices, and histories of male–male desire.

Chapter 4 contends that Raj Rao and Neel Mukherjee adopt different stances toward the production of taxonomies, partly in order to critique the current categorization and marginalization of "homosexuality" in India and Euro-America. While in *The Boyfriend* Rao insists that gay identity is inevitably syncretized with "local" identity markers like class, caste, and language, proposing that it should be extricated from this nexus, Mukherjee rejects all taxonomies. Rao's

alignment of an initially Euro-American homosexuality with historical moments of communal schism in India heralds a partial transformation of the former, but Mukherjee's invocation of the Indian past resists such mappings, suggesting that its potential to affect the present is primarily affective or experiential. Lastly, Chapter 5 focuses on the emergence of open expressions of homosexual identity and their coexistence with models of same-sex sexual indeterminacy in popular cinema. This change has been expedited, I argue, by a range of mediatory representational strategies. The films analyzed in this chapter, *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages*, and *Quest/Thaang*, use syncretic narratives of gayness, HIV/AIDS, and the figure of the sympathetic Indian woman to refract themes that might otherwise prove disturbing for conservative members of the audience. Engaging with these works of literature and film, we become acutely aware of "the unrationalized coexistence" of diverse identities and practices of same-sex desire, and their potential for syncretic signification and embodiment, in contemporary Indian culture.

CHAPTER 1

Contradictions or Syncretism? The Politics of Female–Female Desire in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Ligy J. Pullappally's *Sancharram* (*The Journey*)

Introduction

The importance of Deepa Mehta's film *Fire* for the burgeoning gay and lesbian rights movement in India cannot be overstated. Many commentators[1] locate the beginnings of a public dialogue surrounding lesbianism in the historical moment of the film's release and dissemination in late 1998 and early 1999, which was marked by acrimonious debates surrounding its representation of female–female desire. Yet affirmations of the national significance of *Fire*, whether made by members of the Left or the Right, frequently elided the demographic limitations of its politics. Just as the film focuses on the Anglophone Indian middle classes, so was its English-language form inaccessible to much of the population. Shohini Ghosh has persuasively identified a similarly exclusionary logic surrounding the reception of Mehta's films in Euro-America: "A less careful reading of the *Fire* and *Water* controversies runs the risk of being interpreted as a tussle between a modern (progressive) text and a traditional (regressive society), and a majority of mainstream critics in the West (particularly in the US and Canada) saw them that way."[2] Significantly, *Fire* had already been circulating on the international festival circuit for some two years prior to its release in India. If it initially marketed itself as a window into "oppressive" Hindu customs from outside India, once inside it insinuated that the

English language was the proper vehicle for critique and progress, contributing to the developmental and sometimes exclusively Anglophone taxonomies of the gay and lesbian movements that succeeded it.

Fire depicts a middle-class Hindu joint family consisting of two brothers, Ashok (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) and Jatin (Jaaved Jaaferi), and their respective wives, Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das). Beginning with Jatin and Sita's honeymoon, the narrative charts the latter's inability to adjust to her new family. Both wives are neglected by their spouses: Ashok is a celibate ascetic who prefers his *swami* (guru, Ram Gopal Bajaj) to his wife, while the lustful Jatin retains his Hong Kong Chinese girlfriend, Julie (Alice Poon), after marrying Sita. As Radha and Sita grow increasingly disillusioned, they seek solace from each other and their relationship eventually becomes sexual, a development witnessed by Ashok and Jatin's mute and crippled mother, Biji (Kushal Rekhi), and their manservant, Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhry).

Despite *Fire*'s inflammatory content, in November 1998 India's Censor Board of Film Certification, led by Asha Parekh, approved its release, noting its singular importance for Indian women. Opening in 42 cinemas nationwide, it proved immensely popular. Yet on December 3, 1998, two hundred Shiv Seniks, Hindu militants from the far right, stormed into Mumbai's Cinemax cinema, destroying property and publicly burning *Fire* posters, after which local screenings of the film were discontinued. Delhi's Regal Cinema was also attacked as part of a campaign of violent protest justified by Shiv Seniks such as Mina Kulkarni, who famously announced, "If women's physical needs get fulfilled through lesbian acts, the institution of marriage will collapse, reproduction of human beings will stop."[3] In response, many cinemas would not show *Fire*, and it was returned to the Censors for reappraisal on December 4, eventually being re-released, unexpurgated, in February 1999. During the controversy the Stree Sangam in Mumbai and SALGA in New York, and the new members of the short-lived lesbian rights group CALERI, which was formed in answer to the reactions of the Shiv Sena and cinemas' refusal to screen *Fire*, staged peaceful demonstrations throughout India, including a candlelit vigil outside Delhi's Regal Cinema on December 7, 1998, causing outrage by brandishing signs displaying slogans such as "Indian and Lesbian."

Although *Fire* may have opened up issues of gay and lesbian rights in India, it has arguably been instrumental in the polarization of "Western" pro-lesbian and pro-gay activism and the putative Indian

refusal or incapacity to name same-sex desire. The film's privileging of English over Hindi may have contributed to the widespread insistence that the former is the only language available for the expression of identitarian sexual politics. These assumptions exemplify how "Western" politics are often oversimplified so that the binary opposition of straight vs gay/lesbian signifies *the* Occidental discourse of sexuality. Eve Sedgwick's work questions the authoritativeness of such categories:

> The specificity, materiality, and variety of sexual practices, along with their diverse meanings for individual lives, can be done better justice in a context where the impoverished abstractions that claim to define sexuality can be treated as not authoritative. The dividing up of sexual acts—indeed all persons—under the "opposite" categories of "homo" and "hetero" is not a natural given but a historical process, still incomplete today and ultimately impossible but categorized by potent contradictions and explosive effects.[4]

Exemplifying dissidence within anti-essentialist Euro-American theory toward this totalizing sexual taxonomy, Sedgwick's writing also articulates the pitfalls in considering one dominant formulation of sexual identity metonymic for all the sexual politics and possibilities of the culture from which it emerges. By implication, it is ill-advised to postulate a dichotomy of Western versus Indian conceptions of sexual practice or identity, for these are neither complete nor internally coherent. To claim that *Fire* implicitly privileges what Sedgwick calls "impoverished abstractions" over an appreciation of such forms of syncretism would be oversimplified. More aptly, the film presents a contradictory and often paradoxical worldview which is irreducible to a single ideology. For example, the "repressive" Hindu joint family is also a fecund space for the emergence of female–female desire; Hinduism functions as a synecdoche for the entire Indian nation, but it is contrasted with alternative traditions like Islam; Mehta seems to privilege an "Occidental" pro-lesbian sexual politics over "local" versions of female–female desire, but she also portrays Radha and Sita's relationship as situational and ultimately subordinate to *Fire*'s larger critique of Hindu patriarchy. Despite Mehta's contention that "Fire is not a film about lesbians,"[5] female–female desire is explored lingeringly and erotically, far exceeding the exigencies of feminist defiance. While these juxtapositions might be defined as syncretism, this is problematized by Mehta's repeated polarization of East and West and her overarching insinuation that apparently oppositional

cultural forms cannot fuse or coexist, encouraging us instead to analyze their contiguity in *Fire* in terms of contradiction, ambivalence, and paradox.

After *Fire* I turn to Ligy Pullappally's Malayalam-language film *Sancharram* (*The Journey*), which depicts the love between two young women in a village in Kerala. I argue that, rather than upholding the binary oppositions of tradition and modernity and East and West, *Sancharram* explores the syncretism of coexisting positions which in *Fire* seem largely irreconcilable. These dyads are sidestepped in *Sancharram* partly through the exploration of a female–female desire which arises independently of social constraints and anti-patriarchal resistance. As S. A. Meghani argues, "*The Journey* challenges a broad, external perception of strict heteronormativity in India, although within the nation, its southern Malayalam-speaking setting of Kerala does not present anything of a challenge to the centralized, Hindutva ideal of the heteronormative nation."[6] To draw on Meghani's assertion, perhaps Pullappally has chosen the Malayali setting precisely to evade national religious and linguistic debates. Through political and linguistic decentralization, she circumvents representations that are synecdochic for the ideology of the nation and are easily placed in mutual opposition. Instead, in *Sancharram* female–female desire emerges as substantive and capable of accommodating both Indian and initially Euro-American elements of culture and identity.

Fire

Born in Amritsar in 1950, Deepa Mehta emigrated to Canada in 1973, where she is currently based. Her most critically successful films are the *Fire*, *Earth*, and *Water*[7] trilogy, and she is frequently dubbed the "voice of a new India." Yet Jacqueline Levitin calls her "Canada's most internationally renowned woman film-maker,"[8] and the bulk of her funding has come from Canadian sources. Consistently referring to her viewers as Canadian and/or international rather than Indian, Mehta has been accused of presenting negative images of Indianness to satisfy Euro-American audiences. Gita Patel claims that "In South Asia, [*Fire*] can be read immediately, and what may be subtly subdued for diasporic audiences becomes needlessly excessive,"[9] but even "diasporic audiences" cannot fail to grasp the trenchancy of Mehta's critique. As a corollary, resistance can only be located in behaviors that radically destabilize Hindu patriarchy, and female–female desire

is the only sufficiently "excessive" counterpoint to those masculinist strictures of the Hindu joint family that foreclose women's agency and sexuality.

Such proscriptions are emphasized by the audience's introduction to Radha in the cinematographically circumscribed space of the Hindu home, where she is applying talcum powder to Biji's back. Paralyzed and struck dumb by a stroke, Biji's principal means of communication is a small bell, and she wears the Hindu widow's white sari, which Mehta deploys as a metaphor for oppressive tradition. Her film *Water*,[10] which explores existence in a widow home in Varanasi, uses the white sari of its protagonist, Kalyani (Lisa Ray), to emblematize her struggle between compulsory chastity and her attraction to a young suitor, Narayan (John Abraham). This binary opposition, as in *Fire*, exceeds the sexual and becomes metonymic for the dichotomy of social interdiction versus individual freedom. Unlike Kalyani, Biji does not experience desire, instead containing and curtailing it, epitomized when she spits on Mundu and Radha's faces to condemn their different brands of sexual deviance. Biji is a clichéd figure who keeps the Hindu household under constant surveillance, whose unfaltering gaze is a metaphor for the apparently relentless constraints on women within the joint family, and thus she is little more than a caricature. More revealing than analyzing her character is an enquiry into the ostensible source of her beliefs: Ramanand Sagar's televised *Ramayan*, which she is shown watching throughout the film. This epic serial engrossed the nation when it ran on Doordarshan in the late 1980s,[11] and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay notes its prevalence in *Fire*:

> Ramanand Sagar's saga of Rama is like glue in the film: it joins schematically one theme with another and composes the whole: "the unhappy middle-class family," "sexual alienation," "technological boom." The modern "fast-forward" and the traditional "rewind," "post-Babri Masjid India"—each is articulated by and through *Ramanand Ramayana*.[12]

Bandyopadhyay usefully highlights the importance of the *Ramanand Ramayan*, but he also claims that Mehta is "de-essentializing and dissolving the reified image of Sita as Rama's faithful, bovine consort into insubstantial elements by narrating this image-building, the progressive taming of Sita, as being mostly coextensive with the project of nation-building."[13] *Fire* does map the connections between the putative meekness of Sita and constructing the nation, but it falls

short of de-essentializing this relationship because it elides the host of alternative Sitas available in literary and oral traditions.

The film portrays several alternative versions of the *Ramayana*, including the *Ramlila*, a folk performance of Lord Ram's life based on different incarnations of the text, but their distinctness is suppressed and they become extensions of Sagar's serial, both in their caricatured patriarchal ideology and their minimal presence among the visual and verbal references to the *Ramanand Ramayan*. When *Fire* critiques this television production which emerged at a time of intense religious conservatism, fomented by the ascendancy of the BJP, it seems to be disparaging the foundations of Hinduism itself, as opposed to one conservative manifestation of Hindu patriarchy. As Heidi Pauwels notes:

> It will no longer do to blame a timeless mythological Sita, or Rama, or Valmiki, or *Ramayana* for women's woes. While the Sanskrit text certainly is steeped in patriarchal principles, it leaves still some maneuvering room for Sita as a strong character. There are nuances, but . . . in the television version, Sita is meeker and buys into and promotes patriarchal structures more actively.[14]

In *Fire*, as the *Ramanand Ramayan* unfolds in flat, etiolated form on the family television, Sita's *agni-pariksha*[15] seems jerky and unconvincing, especially in contrast with the superior production values of Mehta's film. Hence her choice of the name "Sita" for her female protagonist is an attack on what she sees as the two-dimensional masculinism of the *Ramayana*, which in this powerful visual moment is conflated with the patriarchal depredations of Sagar's serial. Sita has been subject to diverse imaginings in the many rewritings of the epic, but *Fire* restricts itself to a single incarnation in its criticism of Hindu patriarchy. When Mehta's Sita remarks, "Isn't it amazing? We're so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press this button marked tradition and I start responding like a trained monkey," her comment is redolent of an epistemological elision, perhaps a directorial strategy, whereby a single version of Hinduism or the *Ramayana*, both of which are in reality multiform and polyphonous, is taken to be the only version. This may mimic the power of patriarchy and Hindutva to silence oppositional discourses from within Hinduism itself, but *Fire* does not separate its own elision from the one that it seems to be repudiating. The film's insistence that one account of tradition or the *Ramayana* can speak for all Hinduism reproduces the

essentializing strategies of the Hindu Right, albeit with different ideological effects. *Fire*, like the televised *Ramayana*, overlooks the scope for women's agency in the original text, as well as those rewritings which foreground their volition and authority. For example, while Mehta's Sita is forced to stay with Jatin, Valmiki emphasizes Sita's autonomous decision to accompany Ram when he is exiled from Ayodhya. This is not to say that Valmiki's text is somehow proto-feminist, but it offers Sita more choices than *Fire* implies. Numerous rewritings of the *Ramayana* have also portrayed Sita as independent and empowered; in the *Adbhut Ramayana*,[16] for instance, she slays a demon more terrifying than any faced by Ram himself.

The supposed singularity of Hinduism is emphasized by *Fire*'s critique of its construction of sexual desire; Mehta's Radha resembles Sagar's characterization in his serial *Shri Krishna*,[17] aired on Doordarshan from 1993, which Pauwels describes as "the version in which she is most clearly domesticated."[18] The Radha of *Fire* is initially a subservient wife lacking the agency and sensuality of the *gopis* (cow-herd girls) in the *Bhagavata Purana* (ninth to eleventh century CE) or the Radha of the *Gita Govinda* (Jayadeva, twelfth century CE), and her closest likeness is Sita as constructed by the Hindu Right, with the liberated lover of Krishna in medieval texts nowhere in evidence. Radha's image cannot be rooted in a single canonical work, but *Fire* implies that the incarnation it subverts is the only one available. Other elements of South Asian history are incorporated into this monolithic vision of Hindu thought too; the behavior of Ashok, whose name recalls the Mauryan[19] emperor of India and his conversion to Buddhism, self-abnegation and *ahimsa* after a lifetime of rapacious slaughtering, draws on South Asian narratives of asceticism and sexual abstinence, which *Fire* implies are time-honored and essential Hindu values. Yet the four-stage Hindu life cycle (the *ashramas*) promotes sexual activity during the *grihasthya*, or householder stage, and not until an individual renounces worldly ties in the *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa ashramas*[20] is the abandonment of all desire prescribed. *Fire* also elides Hindu paeans to sexual and romantic love, including the *Kamasutra* and the Tantric current of Hinduism, which posits that sex between a man and a woman is a union of Shiva and Shakti, the male and female principles. It would be imprudent and Orientalist to characterize India as once experiencing a golden age of unabashed sexual pleasure, as Jyoti Puri has cautioned,[21] but Hinduism's attitude toward such pleasures has always been more ambivalent than *Fire* suggests.

Instead, Ashok's particular version of sexual self-abnegation is apparently tantamount to the Hindu ideal, and Jatin is hypersexed *and* irreligious.

More accurately, Ashok's sexual continence follows Gandhian precedents, which emerges in a conversation with his *swami*:

> *Swami*: How do you expel this desire night?
> *Ashok*: You start by keeping all the objects of temptation around you and test yourself against them until all desires leave your mind and body. Desire is the root of all evil.

Ashok's self-testing, like Gandhi's, involves lying in bed with his wife and forcing himself not to touch her, a practice he has been following for thirteen years. In his autobiography, Gandhi notes: "The knowledge that a perfect observance of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) means realization of Brahman, I did not owe to a study of the shastras. It grew upon me with experience."[22] Gandhi's more sophisticated vision of the four *ashramas* and his unwillingness to blindly follow the *shastras* (ancient Hindu treatises), instead intuiting the utility of celibacy, opposes Ashok's unquestioning obedience to "tradition." The disparity between Gandhi's thoughtful negotiations of *moksha* (enlightenment) and the more trivial, solecistic, and appealingly assonant "desire night" articulated by the *swami* emphasizes how this scene is destined for consumption within neo-Orientalist narratives of Indian spirituality. Robin Sharma's *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* is one such narrative, a novel-length "parable" depicting an American lawyer who abandons an "out-of-balance life" and embarks "on a life-changing odyssey to an ancient culture [where] he meets Himalayan gurus who offer wise and practical lessons that teach us to:—Develop joyful thoughts—Follow our life's mission . . . Live fully, one day at a time."[23] Sharma's writing exemplifies the tenor of many reductionist discourses of Indian mysticism. This rhetoric is echoed in *Fire*, partly in order to render the *swami*'s words immediately intelligible and familiar to Euro-American audiences, but the critique of celibacy can only function once it is dissociated from Orientalist longings for completion. Hence Ashok uses the Buddhist phrase "Desire is the root of all evil," lent a quotidian familiarity in Euro-America by its echoes of the Biblical "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (Timothy 6:10), for "Indian spirituality" to be transformed, apparently from within, into an obstacle to fulfillment.

Perhaps the ultimate indictment of Hinduism is *Fire*'s portrayal of the *agni-pariksha*. Mehta remarked in an interview that the *agni-pariksha* "happens three times in the film, to make sure that . . . it wasn't just me indulging in the agnipariksha for Radha and Sita, but that in the whole context of tradition, and the stereotyping of Indian women, that we, I, the actors understood where they were coming from."[24] The *agni-pariksha* in *Fire* becomes another stereotype, an overdetermined symbol of oppressive Hindu masculinism, with the final conflagration occurring near the end of the film and almost immolating Radha. Complicating the *agni-pariksha* in the *Ramayana*, which restores order and purity by assaying and controlling women's sexuality, *Fire* emphasizes the duality of the fire metaphor as a signifier of lustration and lust. The film's inferno represents both patriarchy's inability to contain the destructiveness of its purifying rituals and the impossibility of obliterating women's "burning" sexual desires. Ironically, the "corrupt" Hindu joint family must be destroyed to make way for the purity of Radha and Sita's love, idealized in contradistinction to the perversions of a masturbating Mundu or a philandering Jatin, who are apparently the casualties of Hindu sexual repression.

Because *Fire* conflates one patriarchal expression of Hinduism with all Hindu tradition, resistance can only be located outside it. Sita is far from the ideal wife, questioning Jatin incessantly and seducing Radha, but Mehta does not situate her agency in Hinduism, instead insisting that the only tradition that can countenance women's emancipation and female–female desire is a "Western" one. The film undermines "Indian" (i.e., Hindu) myths concerning wifely devotion, such as when Radha and Sita must observe *Karva Chauth*, a fast to prolong their husbands' lives. Radha explains how they are emulating the practices of a queen devoted to her king,[25] a Hindu model of wifely virtue, and Sita replies:

> *Sita*: What a wimp . . . I mean the queen. And as for the king, I think he's a jerk.
> *Radha*: She didn't have any choices.
> *Sita*: I'm so sick of all this devotion . . . we can find choices.

This dialogue, which draws on North American slang like "jerk" to dismiss Indian "tradition," implies an ideological confrontation between an adoptive Euro-American worldview and its Indian obverse. Both Sita's rejection of female servitude and her regionally specific

idiom recollect developmental narratives of female emancipation, conceived in the "West" and applied to the "developing world," expressed in a putatively superior language: English. *Fire* frequently dichotomizes "Indian conservatism" and "Western liberalism" through language; in a dialogue that occurs after Ashok has witnessed the two women making love, Radha remarks that she wishes she had told him before and Sita rebukes her:

> *Sita*: What would you have said? Goodbye, Ashok, I'm leaving you for Sita? I love her but not like a sister-in-law? Now listen, Radha, there's no word in our language that can describe what we are, how we feel for each other.
> *Radha*: Perhaps you're right. Seeing is less complicated.

Sita conflates an essential identity predicated on female–female desire with the affective dimensions of love between women. Self-evidently, these narratives are not discrete, but *Fire* implicitly endows the "West" with the exclusive capacity to name both sexual identity and amorous structures of feeling between women. As Ruth Vanita has persuasively shown, however, terms such as the Sanskrit *swayamvara sakhi* and the Hindi *saheli* adequately express this strength of feeling, and in some contexts their meanings may overlap with eroticism.[26]

By portraying English as irrecoverably foreign, in opposition to "our language," *Fire* propagates a dichotomous worldview and disavows linguistic and cognitive syncretism. Sita's sardonic and incredulous rhetorical questions circumvent debate, forming a crescendo toward the absolute negation of the capacity of "our language," left indistinct so that it functions as a synecdoche for all communication outside English, to verbalize female–female desire. This follows *Fire*'s condensation of the manifold facets of Indian existence, including those that affirm female–female sexuality, into the monolithic category "Indian." Many Euro-American viewers might assume that what is represented is not a specific instance of repression within a Hindu joint family but rather a unitary and timeless exemplum of Indian consciousness. Within this binary schema, it would be logical for Sita and Radha to take refuge in English and lesbianism, but paradoxically the women imply the typological superiority of English while tacitly affirming its unavailability, even though it is their primary medium of communication. Caught in the limbo between speaking and not speaking English, they can merely hint at the word "lesbian" without ever voicing it,

foreclosing the possibilities of visibility or politicism which would accompany this naming. If "local" sexual practices and identities are elided here, along with the languages in which they might be expressed, no substitution is possible. It is in this ontological and ideological vacuum that the political agency of the female–female desiring subject disappears.

Yet even as *Fire* makes one voice synecdochic for the nation, it insinuates that alternative histories and articulations are available. Islam is associated with love and freedom from the outset, when Sita and Jatin are honeymooning at the Taj Mahal.[27] Running through the daylight in a liberating long shot, Sita subsequently listens rapt to a guide explaining the genesis of the building, while Jatin remains silhouetted some distance away in a dark archway, uninterested in the history of love in Mughal South Asia. The starkly contrasting imagery suggests a conflict between Sita's optimism, here aligned with the apparent manumission of Islamic eroticism, and Jatin's fatalistic acceptance of a loveless Hindu marriage, complicating the simultaneous insistence that the Hindu joint family is India and India is hostile to desire and freedom. Such ruptures also occur within the film's portrayal of Hinduism, and even its most trenchant moments of critique are riven with ambivalence. Belying Madhu Kishwar's remark that *Fire* is simply the "naive outpourings of a self-hating Indian,"[28] the film sporadically suggests that Hinduism may facilitate the expression and production of female–female desire, rather than unwaveringly opposing it. In 1998 Bal Thackeray, then head of the Shiv Sena, affirmed that lesbianism did not exist in Hindu families, objecting to Mehta's naming of Sita and Radha after Hindu goddesses and suggesting that all protests would be halted were the women given Muslim names.[29] Implicit in Thackeray's reaction was the concern that "lesbianism" could exist even in Hinduism's most sacrosanct spaces, a threat that could only be circumvented by deflecting all nonnormative sexuality onto the Muslim other. *Fire*'s own polarization of Hindu repression and Islamic sexual self-expression mimics that of the Hindu Right, admittedly with inverted moral valences, but it also suggests that Hindu customs and rituals can be brought to sanction female–female desire through reinterpretation and appropriation. For example, it is not Jatin but Radha who invites Sita to break her fast at the end of *Karva Chauth*, thus bestowing the hallowed connotations of the male–female relationship on its female–female counterpart. In another erotic frame Radha oils Sita's hair to a soundtrack of the *bansuri*, with lingering

shots of bangles mounted on the wall, suggesting the reinvention of a traditional homosocial routine as "homoeroticism." The bangles, specific types of which symbolize male–female marriage in some regions and communities, may indirectly sanction the women's union and allude to Hinduism's potential acceptance of female–female love.

Fire also suggests that female–female sexuality can go unnoticed because of the homosocial intimacy women enjoy in both private and public spheres, as Shohini Ghosh has argued.[30] When the family are picnicking and Sita is massaging Radha's feet erotically, Ashok considers their actions apt and innocent, remarking, "I am very lucky to have such a good family." Here a "good family" is one in which many forms of female homosociality, perhaps extending to sexual desire, can exist publicly and go unremarked, with the sexual frequently sublimated and refocused on less insistently erogenous zones like the feet or the hair. Similar displacements appear in classic Bollywood films like *Pakeezah*,[31] where the most erotically charged moment revolves around Saleem Ahmed Khan's (Raaj Kumar) catching sight of the heroine, Sahibjaan (Meena Kumari), on the sleeping coach of a train, and his leaving her an anonymous note: "Āpke paō dekhe; bahut hasīn haī. Inhē zamīn par mat utāriegā—mele ho jāenge. Āpkā, ek humsafar" ("I saw your feet; they are very beautiful. Don't place them on the ground—they will get dirty. Yours, a fellow traveler"). Because Sahibjaan is a courtesan (although unbeknown to Saleem), her potentially dangerous and explicit sexualization must be suggested yet also evaded in this eulogy; the note represents a knowing codification that is silently appreciated by the audience, Saleem, and Sahibjaan herself. If these deliberate cipherings constitute a consensus on the unspeakability of sexuality, they also amplify the space in which it can be expressed without derogatory designation. In *Fire* feet are sexualized further when Jatin sensuously paints Julie's toenails, and, more implicitly, when Ashok massages his *swami's* feet and calves, the scene is partly viewable as the public codification of homoeroticism as religious homosociality. It would be erroneous to celebrate the permissibility of such sexualities and their production as long as they remain unvoiced, but the blurring of boundaries between same-sex friendship and sexuality, and the potential for codified erotic play in the public sphere, gainsay the contention that contemporary Hinduism is entirely inimical to individual desires and sexual practices.

This ambivalence is epitomized by *Fire*'s climax, which encapsulates the vacillation between considering Hinduism either a constraint on or a catalyst for nonnormative sexuality, alongside the concern that the film be intelligible for Euro-American audiences. When Ashok tells Radha, "What I saw in the bedroom is a sin in the eyes of God and men," his outburst draws on both the concept of wrongdoing in, to cite the ubiquitous Biblical phrase, "the sight of God," and the characterization of homosexuality within Biblical exegesis as an expression of universal and intrinsic evil. The Hindu equivalent of "sin," *papa*, is more contingent, primarily denoting an infraction of *dharma* (loosely translatable as the way, code, or moral order). While this assailment ostensibly comes from within a monolithic Hinduism, it more closely resembles a Judeo-Christian history of religious intolerance. Ashok's insistence throughout the remainder of the conversation that what is problematic is not female–female desire but desire *per se*, a stance recalling his earlier remark on the intrinsic evil of this emotion and reiterating his brand of Gandhian asceticism, reveals the contradictoriness of his position. Yet it would be misguided to consider this moment proof that *Fire* is an unsuccessful product of directorial confusion. Instead, it may exemplify Mehta's vision of the incompatibility of discourses of tradition and modernity, East and West, desire and duty, in the ideological terrain of modern India.

Sancharram

Set in a small Malayali village, *Sancharram* tells the story of two young women, Kiran (Suhasini Nair) and Delilah (Shruti Menon), whose love relationship eventually comes to light and scandalizes the community. In a 2006 interview, Ligy Pullappally, the film's writer and director, claimed:

> I made this film for a number of reasons, among them to respond to the Indian film "Fire," and the films are frequently compared as that film handled the subject of a lesbian relationship as well. I enjoyed "Fire" very much, but found the idea of the women choosing to be with each other because they weren't satisfied with their male relationships, unconvincing. There appears to be a common misconception that women become gay because of a lack of suitable men. My personal belief is that homosexuality has little to do with either the actions, or inactions of the opposite gender . . . In addition, "Fire" is an English language film in an urban setting. I made my film

> to reflect the more traditional gay experience in India. My characters are unapologetically gay and speak a regional South Indian language.[32]

If *Sancharram* attempted to resituate female–female desire outside the uniformly Anglophone cinematic universe of *Fire*, there is an apparent contradiction between the sexual ideology underpinning its production and reception, contained in terms like "gay" and "homosexuality," and the delineation of the more "traditional . . . experience in India." Pullappally's casual juxtaposition suggests that she does not consider these mutually exclusive, however, and *Sancharram* presents a subdued critique of *Fire*'s politics by questioning the presentation of "Western modernity" and "Indian tradition" as incompatible.

The regional language cinemas of India tend to be more experimental than mainstream Hindi film owing to their limited commercial potential, and works in Malayalam have often flirted with the pleasures of sexual nonnormativity. T. Muraleedharan notes that films like *Pranayavarnangal* (*Colours of Love/Romance*, 1998) and *Ennu Swantham Janakikutty* (*Yours Janakikutty*, 1997) contain romantic friendships between girls and codified portrayals of female–female desire without subscribing to a politics of lesbianism.[33] Pullappally builds on such films in her focus on the porosity of friendship, love, and sex between women, exceeding them in the explicitness of Kiran and Delilah's relationship. The omnipresence of Malayalam and the absence of sexual categories also endow *Sancharram* with national significance: like many same-sex desiring subjects in India, Kiran and Delilah have no access to the gay and lesbian rights movement.[34] Recalling *Fire*, *Sancharram* contains condemnations of same-sex desire expressed in the rhetoric of Judeo-Christianity and psychiatry and medicine, but these are syncretized in the local context. Finding expression in Malayalam and the occasional English phrase or word, they are explicitly linked to religio-cultural traditions like Hinduism and Nayar Christianity, which seem imbricated in the villagers' consciousness.

At the start of the film Kiran, dressed entirely in white, is about to hurl herself over a waterfall because Delilah is getting married. The color of the former's clothing expresses her feelings of bereavement in the face of the latter's defection, a metaphorical widowhood that is combined with the prospect of suicide to evoke *sati*. Yet this particular rendition and the general practice are not symmetrical[35]: to

invoke Spivak's description of Bhubaneswari, Kiran may be rewriting "the social text of sati-suicide in an interventionist way."[36] Drawing on the ordinances of *sati* to express the extent of her grief, she simultaneously defies the patriarchal abjection of female–female sexuality. If *Fire* notes how its lovers can appropriate Hindu traditions, the telos is a self-consciously Westernized model of desire and freedom. Kiran's version of *sati* both adheres to this model, for it is voluntary and reinforces her apartness from society, suggesting that she would rather die than relinquish her sexuality, and elaborates her honor and state of mourning. In their societal dimensions these concepts transcend reverence for the "completely autonomous individual," which cultural commentators like Sudhir Kakar have claimed is stronger in Euro-America, but which *Sancharram* implies has coextensive resonance in many Indian contexts.[37]

When Kiran is a child, the family return to their village and her mother (Amika Trissur) introduces her to their ancestral Nayar home,[38] or *taravad*:

> This is Mummy's *taravad*. This is the *taravad* of the ancient, great Kuruppans. In those days, the heads of families (*karanavans*) were great warriors. There was a *kalari* (martial arts training ground) in this very courtyard, which also contained a family deity. This is where your mother, your grandmother and their grandmothers were born and brought up. You could have been, too, had we not moved . . . But your children will be born and brought up in these halls one day. Thus the heritage of my *taravad* will continue through you.

The traditions of the *taravad* comprehend "masculine" warmongering and "feminine" maternity, which, while remaining tethered to biological sex, suggest that history is heterogeneous at even the most local level. Such narratives are not divorced from the national, however, because Kiran's family have spent much of their lives in North India. This dialectic both reflects and contributes to her self-definition according to Nayar accounts of "manly" bellicosity and the masculinity more widely associated with female-female desire and lesbianism.

On discovering her daughter's relationship with Delilah, Kiran's mother remonstrates that she prefers fighting to heeding her parents' advice, and Kiran responds that she is a Nayar girl, descended of warriors. Invoking her male forebears informs her embodiment of Nayar identity, strengthening her resolve to pursue Delilah despite

widespread opposition.[39] Yet Kiran's appropriation of masculine histories is ambivalently valenced: her actions invite approbation because they have genealogical precedents and opprobrium because citing this connectedness emphasizes her gender nonconformity. Similarly, when her mother presents her with jewelry for her future dowry, she chooses a glass bangle associated with the transgressive love of a Nayar ancestress. Kiran gives the bangle to Delilah and it comes to symbolize an unconventional relationship in the present that is implicitly sanctioned by the past. If in *Fire* the scene where Sita and Radha place bangles on each other's wrists suggests their appropriation of the patriarchal history of marriage, the bangle in *Sancharram* evokes the heterogeneity of past institutions and their coeval defiance and infraction. It also metaphorizes local and national traditions, as when it is finally broken by Delilah's *Amma* (KPAC Lalitha), it conjures nationwide practices of destroying bangles to express widowhood. This mapping is problematized, however, because the bangle has been broken by mistake, and it signifies a metaphorical rather than literal bereavement: Delilah has been coerced into rejecting her female lover and marrying Sebastian (uncredited).

The scenes that take place at Kiran and Delilah's school, like the former's Nayar heritage, contain stories of illicit love. When we first encounter her, their teacher (Sangeeta) is introducing the twentieth-century Malayalam writer Sugatha Kumari's poem "Krishna, You Don't Know Me," which explores the silent and tormented adoration of a *gopika* (cow-herd girl) for Krishna. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita note that "The tragic quest for love has been accepted as the feminine condition in many of Sugatha Kumari's love poems . . . in 'Krishna, You Don't Know Me' the archetypal romance of Radha and Krishna is transformed into a saga of human longing."[40] Asked to interpret this poem, Kiran opines that it deals with the abject loneliness of being in love, indirectly expressing what she believes to be her unrequited feelings for Delilah through Sugatha Kumari's feminist reinvention of Krishna and the *gopikas*, which itself draws on the multiplicity of existing accounts of Krishna's life. Later, the teacher tells another tale of frustrated love:

> It's a timeless story, one that transcends country and culture. Their families would never let the lovers unite. They had been feuding for generations. But their love for one another and its turbulent consequences would affect their families, their society, and, most deeply, themselves. Still, despite the consequences, their love itself remained unassailable.

Whether she is describing *Layla and Majnun* or *Romeo and Juliet* is deliberately ambiguous. If "Krishna You Don't Know Me" depicts silent longings that cannot be articulated because of the prevailing social order, *Layla and Majnun* and *Romeo and Juliet* privilege individual desire over society. These sagas produced in different geographical regions emblematize similar values. All three texts, despite their potential association with the local, the national, and the Euro-American, coexist syncretically, reflecting and informing Kiran's love for Delilah, which comprehends mute suffering *as well as* defiance of the village.

The *Kakkathi*[41] (Sarada Kozhikode), whom Kiran and Delilah first encounter together, refers to female–female desire more directly:

> *Kakkathi*: You have known each other for a long time.
> *Delilah*: Yes, since we were children.
> *Kakkathi*: You will love early. It will run as deep as the love of Shiva and Parvati. In this, you are fortunate.
> *Delilah*: Early marriage for her?
> *Kakkathi*: Hmm . . . a childhood love will ripen.
> *Kiran*: This is absurd. Let's go.
> *Kakkathi*: (addressing Kiran) Tell me, daughter, do you know who you are?
> *Kiran*: Kiran.
> *Kakkathi*: Shame! Above all else, know yourself! Without this, all else lies in shadow.

Because she is the visual repository of tradition, the *Kakkathi*'s exhortation that Kiran acquire self-knowledge seems metonymic for the "local" understanding and acceptance of an identity predicated on female–female desire, but insisting on this psychosexual core is also reminiscent of narratives of lesbianism. Such syncretism, beyond a mimetic representation of the Keralan context, may be indebted to Pullappally's biography: born in Kerala, she was brought up and lives in Chicago, where she has participated in gay and lesbian activism. However it is understood, the *Kakkathi's* insinuation that Kiran's orientation is immutable, while Delilah's is more situational, cannot be attributed to a singular narrative of sexuality. *Sancharram* ends with the *Kakkathi* in the center of the frame cackling gleefully, just after Kiran's near-suicide, and the audience is left with the lasting impression of

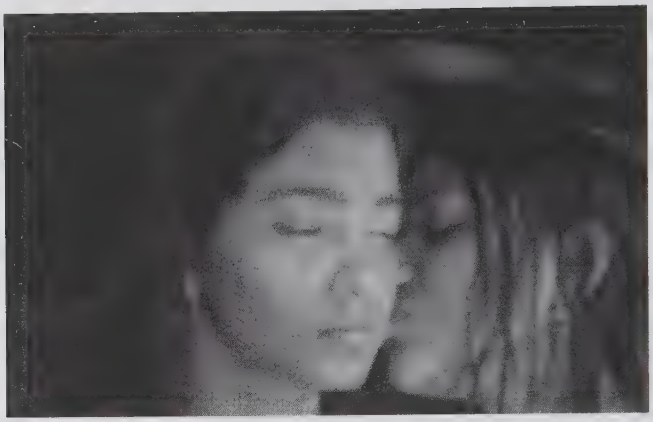

Figure 1.1 *Sancharram*: Kiran and Delilah on the steps of the bathing pond

an ineluctable female–female desire that may or may not register as "lesbian."

Sancharram depicts other facets of Malayali existence which seem hospitable to female–female desire, too; the bathing-pond, a single-sex space within the *taravad* on the banks of which Kiran and Delilah first make love (Figure 1.1), is explored in the writing of Kamala Das, who suggests in works like *A Childhood in Malabar* and "The Sandal Trees" that such loci facilitate love and sex between women in a manner that goes unremarked and may be tacitly countenanced (see Chapter 2).[42] Similarly, Delilah's aged *Ammachi*[43] (Valsala Menon) is sympathetic to her relationship with Kiran, claiming that the forced marriage between her granddaughter and Sebastian is unjust. Recalling Biji, *Ammachi* wears the white attire appropriate for Hindu widows, but she is a Nayar Christian, evidenced by the cross around her neck and the icon of Christ in her bedroom: her character is as much an embodiment of Malayali syncretism, then, as it is a marker of longer-standing elements of "tradition."

Indeed, the villagers' main preoccupation is not the putatively essential "immorality" of illicit sexuality but the contingency of reputation. When Haji Ali's daughter runs away with a young man, Delilah's mother wonders what else she has to lose, and later, when the girl is found, a neighbor remarks that she is better off dead. The implication is that, had she not been discovered, there would have been little need for censure. On learning of Delilah's affair, her uncle (uncredited)

voices the family's parallel concerns: "Get her married. You have no choice. Once this news spreads, she'll get no one". By portraying the two situations as symmetrical, *Sancharram* suggests that no moral distinction is made between male–female and female–female desire among the villagers. As Sudhir Kakar remarks:

> The homosexuality is ignored as long as the person does not rub it in the family's face so that other people come to know about it. The parents are more concerned about what others would say if they found out about their son and daughter's homosexuality and less about the deviant sexuality itself.[44]

Any criticism of female–female desire as sinful in itself is more likely, as in Ashok's description of what he saw in the bedroom, to emerge from certain renditions of Judeo-Christianity. Yet the omnipresent ecclesiastical iconography of *Sancharram* highlights the provenance of statements like that of Delilah's uncle: "Don't worry, dear. God forgives all sins." Also associable with specific masculinist iterations of Christianity is Delilah and Sebastian's wedding, whose vows of patriarchal ownership, drawn from Ephesians 5:22–23, vitiate the historical potential for greater freedom in Nayar households. If the villagers have internalized numerous initially Euro-American ideologies that are far removed from a liberatory narrative of gay rights, Kiran's mother draws on discourses of medicalization and the natural/unnatural binary when she discovers the relationship: "You need treatment . . . You . . . you are so unnatural". While she refers to getting treatment in Malayalam (*chikilsippikkanam*), her subsequent affirmation, prevalent in early medical/psychiatric diagnoses and present-day homophobic rhetoric, is voiced in English. This use of two languages to describe "deviance," one of them markedly "local," disallows the alignment of essentialist intolerance with either India or "the West." The community's response to female–female desire draws syncretically on national, Malayali, and initially Euro-American histories and epistemes that emerge, "unrationalized," in the negotiation of Kiran and Delilah's relationship.

Conclusion

Numerous commentators consider *Fire* an unnuanced invective against Hindu patriarchy, but this is a reductionist position. Although Mehta's overall purpose is to critique Hinduism, the film overflows

with contradictory voices. The rejection of "Indian tradition" is dependent on the synecdochic use of a single history or facet of Indian culture to represent the nation, and at the film's most exaggerated moments the polymorphous and multivocal nature of "Indian culture" is elided. It is only by constructing Hinduism and Indianness as monolithic that they can shore up popular binary oppositions such as East/West and tradition/modernity. Perhaps this is necessary to render the film intelligible for Euro-American audiences, and it is partly a concern with intelligibility which results in Ashok's condemnation of sex between women as sinful, a position more familiar to viewers schooled in the Judeo-Christian world, but which Mehta implicitly attributes to Hinduism. However, she also intimates that Sita and Radha can appropriate "local" traditions to express their love and that there is room for nonnormative gender and sexual performances within Hinduism itself. That the politics of these performances are often latent is hardly emblematic of their "backwardness," but it seems excessive to celebrate *Fire*'s "[refusal] to subscribe to the notion that the proper manifestation of same-sex eroticism is within a politics of visibility and identity."[45]

Sancharram opposes the developmental aspects of *Fire* which situate women's freedom and female–female desire in an Anglophone and profoundly Western modernity, exploring how Kiran and Delilah's relationship can draw on Malayali, Indian, and Euro-American traditions to achieve validity and comprensibility. These traditions may be synecdochic for their discrete origins, but they are ultimately inseparable in the local imaginary. *Sancharram* and *Fire* are not representative of "good" or "bad" sexual politics, however, for such value judgments ignore why politics arise *ab initio*. Perhaps in Mehta's view modern India is riven by contradictions, including those that problematize labeling female–female desire. Instead, Pullappally proposes that amid the unselfconscious syncretism of a village in Kerala, love and sex between women make use of *apparently* competing narratives eclectically, contributing to self-definitions which are subjectively and not universally coherent.

CHAPTER 2

"Am I Lesbian?" The Contexts of Female–Female Desire in the Work of Kamala Das

Introduction

In what is perhaps Kamala Das's most famous poem, "An Introduction," she writes:

> The language I speak
> Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
> All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
> Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest.[1]

These lines exemplify the poet's awareness of the syncretic formation of her consciousness and identity, which she emphatically claims with the insistent repetition of "mine" and assertion of individual integrity. Rather than seeing such syncretism as a seamless fusion, she suggests that her language, and by implication the writer herself, are still "half English" and "half Indian." In this chapter I argue that Das's self-fashioning and literary composition are dependent on a multivocality of different intellectual and spiritual positions, many of which, while at first glance contradictory, are imbricated. In light of this polyphony, it is hardly surprising that Das's alleged inconsistency has frustrated many critics of her work. Before discussing how these critics negotiate her apparent contradictions, it will be useful to briefly introduce her to the reader.

Kamala Das, or Madhavikutty, the pseudonym she adopted in her native Kerala, remains one of the best-known Anglophone Indian writers, although she also wrote prolifically in Malayalam. Her work

is regularly included in anthologies of Indian literature and appears in academic curricula throughout the world. She achieved fame in 1965 with her first volume of poetry in English, *Summer in Calcutta*, subsequently receiving many prestigious prizes, including the Sahitya Academy Award, the foremost literary accolade in India. Her controversial autobiography, first published in Malayalam and subsequently rendered in English as *My Story* in 1976, was remarkably bold in its depiction of the failure of her marriage and her quest for love through extramarital affairs. Das was born in 1934 into a Nayar household in Ponnayoorkulam in the south Malabar region. Although she lived in various locations in India until her death in 2009, she remained preoccupied by the easy affection between women and their relative emancipation in her ancestral home, or *taravad*.[2] The young Kamala was affected not only by the interpersonal relationships associated with the institution of the *taravad* but also its bucolic setting. Having grown up between Calcutta and Ponnayoorkulam, she frequently dichotomizes the city and the countryside in her poetry and prose. Given that she was married off at the age of fifteen to a much older relative, Madhava Das, it is not surprising that the lion's share of her oeuvre deals with the problematic nature of duty and its relationship to love and lust. A sense of personal tragedy and neglect at the hands of her husband, as expressed in texts such as *My Story*, also informs much of her writing. Because Das's persona was so very public, her conversion from Hinduism to Islam in 1999, a decision stemming from her involvement with a much younger Muslim man, and one that she later regretted, was widely regarded as a treacherous volte-face. Her detractors claim that this was yet another example of her ideological inconsistency. Her admirers, rather than seeing such changeability as resistance to one-sided political interpretations, frequently overlook these "aberrations" in order to co-opt her in the name of ideologies like feminism and anti-casteism.

Thus far, most analyses of Das's writing have focused on her trenchant critique of patriarchy, subordinating her multifarious literary themes, including same-sex desire, to apparently more pressing feminist preoccupations. As a corrective to this, in "Calling Kamala Das Queer" Rosemary Marangoly George argues that "queerness" plays a significant role in her work. Rejecting "literary feminism that champions women's writing in English,"[3] George suggests a reading practice grounded in queer theory (although in a later article, "Queernesses All Mine," her position is more tentative[4]), where "queer" functions

as both a descriptor of same-sex desiring practices and a free-floating, anti-essentialist reading strategy, or, in her citation of Michael Warner's famous phrase, a "resistance to regimes of the normal."[5] As I argued in the Introduction to the present work, although recent queer theory has professed to dislocate queerness from non-heteronormativity, so that a queer critique has no proper subject or object,[6] the term "queer," even when relegated to a mere reading strategy focusing on difference and dissidence, is inevitably inflected by the essentialist consequences of its political reclamation as an anti-homophobic signifier. Even putting this caveat aside, calling Das "queer" relies on disregarding her own usage of the word as a denotation of strangeness or as a pejorative descriptor of a male homosexual that does not extend to lesbian subjects. In "An Introduction," the "queernesses all mine" of language seem tantamount to idiosyncrasies, whereas in "Composition" we read, "I have/ lost my best friend/ to a middle-aged queer./ The lesbians hiss their love at me,"[7] and there is a clear distinction between male queers and female lesbians.

In this chapter I delineate the implications of "calling Kamala Das queer" and thus politicizing moments of same-sex desire in her work, often in opposition to her own usage, or locating her within the purview of those "local feminist" responses that are overtly or covertly heterosexist (in opposition to those Indian feminisms that insist on gender and sexual diversity). These ideological critical approaches are inclined to inflect Das's writing, appropriating and transforming her authorial concerns in order to satisfy their own political agenda. My reading, while expatiating on the silences and problems engendered by the two radically different positions, suggests that both have some validity. Hence the stumbling block is not that Das is made synecdochic for larger queer or feminist schemes, but that these critical undertakings often depend on disavowing opposing analyses for their intelligibility.

In "Calling Kamala Das Queer" George portrays modernity as synonymous with the political, and by implication queer politics, while the emotional and apolitical are consigned to the realm of her adolescent and "immature" reading of Das's *My Story*. Referring to a "new phase of global literary studies,"[8] she creates a disjunction between progressive understandings of Das's work and "local feminist interpretations":

> From the 1970s to the present, feminist critics writing on Das have been willing to celebrate and second her critique of the institution of marriage,

> and of marital rape, of the obligation to wifely fidelity in marriage at all costs, but not her critique of heterosexuality itself.[9]

This criticism is reminiscent of debates within Euro-American feminism, where putatively more enlightened third-wave feminisms construct themselves in opposition to a monolithic, bourgeois model that does not interrogate the diverse identities and practices circumscribed by the homogenizing category "woman." Indeed, theorists like Judith Butler have explored the problematic nature of "exclusionary gender norms within feminism" at length.[10] By implicitly aligning present-day Indian literary feminisms with the totalizing practices of earlier Euro-American feminist literary theory, George is able to privilege her own "radical" interpretation of the "non-heteronormative" in Das's work as representative of both a holistic and internally differentiated feminism.[11] In order to maintain this outlook, she suggests, she "has no option but to accept the implications of going against the interpretive direction set by local feminist readings of Das's work."[12]

In a parallel movement, George's calling Das "queer" tends to forestall a meaningful engagement with those expressions of same-sex desiring practices and identities which differ from Euro-American models. This becomes evident when she cites the work of Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai: "A queer reading of Kamala Das need not necessarily originate from or circulate only among the diaspora. As the anthology *Same-Sex Love in India* . . . makes clear, there has been a long history of India-based writing on same-sex desire."[13] George conflates the identification and exploration of same-sex desire in Indian literature with the project of queering, suggesting that queer readings can only emerge where same-sex desiring practices and identities are represented. The result is an implicit essentialization of the term and a contradiction of her insistence on its extreme flexibility. All this is not to suggest that such approaches are automatically inappropriate in the Indian context; claiming a queer identity or espousing queer interpretive strategies may be empowering, partly insofar as each helps to forge links with well-established and incipient queer communities globally. Yet it must also be recognized that, in India, "queer" is just one of numerous signifiers that have evolved to describe same-sex desire and other forms of sexual and gender nonnormativity, and queer engagements must therefore acknowledge this far-reaching constitutive syncretism.

As George avers, the majority of "local feminist interpretations" do indeed downplay or distort same-sex desire in Das's work. Devindra Kohli, for instance, evades the matter by dismissing the famous question in the poem "Composition"—"Am I hetero/ Am I lesbian/ Or am I just plain frigid?"—as irrelevant and self-indulgent.[14] Reading these same lines, Lakshmi Raghunandan suggests that "lesbianism" is a mere "perversion of a bewildered mind"; what is important is the real "I" which is "uncorrupted by physical actions."[15] Once again, same-sex desire is negated, this time by means of its subordination to spirituality and Gandhian asceticism. Raghunandan, Kumar Gupta, and Nandini Sahu, to name but a few, are prone to universalizing Das's themes in a manner that focuses exclusively on "heterosexual" feminist agenda.[16] As Gupta contends, "Here is undoubtedly a feminist voice articulating the hopes and oppressions, the concerns and tensions, of womankind."[17] Similarly, Sahu declares:

> Her poetry is not merely Indian like that of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu before her, but a passionate expression of the universal experience of love, despair, anguish and failure apprehended through feminine Indian sensuality . . . Her concern has been the existential anguish of humanity as revealed through woman's relationship with man in the male-dominated society.[18]

George is right to claim that these critics have "straightened out" Das's writing, but to label it "queer" is a problematic corrective. Instead, I suggest that her work is capable of accommodating both "queer" and "local feminist" interpretations because of an authorial subjectivity which is not universalizing but rather, in the words of A. K. Ramanujan, "context-sensitive."

In his influential essay "Is there an Indian Way of Thinking?," Ramanujan remarks that as a young man he was "troubled" by his father's "holding together in one brain both astronomy and astrology." He continues, "I looked for consistency in him, a consistency he didn't seem to care about, or even think about."[19] Rather than ascribing this to hypocrisy, as many other commentators have done, Ramanujan refers to Indian "particularism," epitomized in Hegel's comment, "While we say, 'Bravery is a virtue', the Hindoos say, on the contrary, 'Bravery is a virtue of the Cshatriyas'." Ramanujan explains this by elaborating a theory of "context-free" and "context-sensitive" cultures based on context-free and context-sensitive grammatical rules. An example of the former is: "Sentences must have subjects and predicates in a certain relation." An example of the latter is: "Plurals in

English are realised as –s after stops (e.g. dog-s, cat-s), es before fricatives (e.g. latch-es), ren after the word child, etc."[20] A culture like India tends to be "context-sensitive"; he claims:

> Such a pervasive emphasis on context is, I think, related to the Hindu concern with *jāti*—the logic of classes, of genera and species, of which human *jātis* are only an instance. Various taxonomies of season, landscape, times, *gunas* or qualities (and their material bases), tastes, characters, emotions, essences (*rasa*), etc., are basic to the Hindu thought-work of Hindu medicine and poetry, cooking and religion, erotics and magic. Each *jāti* or class defines a context, a structure of relevance, a meta-communication of what is and can be done.[21]

By citing so many "structures of relevance," Ramanujan posits that what some might see as his father's inconsistencies were in fact different positions emerging from and into different contextual frameworks. Hence:

> Indian borrowings of Western cultural items have been converted and realigned to fit pre-existing context-sensitive needs. When English is borrowed into (or imposed on) Indian contexts, it fits into the Sanskrit slot; it acquires many of the characteristics of Sanskrit, the older native father tongue, its pan-Indian elite character—as a medium of laws, science and administration, and its formulaic patterns; it becomes part of Indian multiple diglossia (a characteristic of context-sensitive societies).[22]

I have used Ramanujan's theory of context-sensitivity as a point of departure in my analysis of the work of Kamala Das, who claimed in an interview for the Indira Gandhi National Open University: "I felt that I was actually sailing with one foot in Bengali culture, another in Malayali culture. If I had three feet, I would say that I was sailing with the third foot in British culture."[23] I argue that Das's portrayals of same-sex desire, like this syncretic self-image, both emanate from and respond to multiple contexts. Paralleling Ramanujan's father, she is capable of "simultaneously holding in one brain" homosexuality, a complex and uneven formation which she nonetheless understands in the contemporary sense of a psychosexual orientation, and "local" articulations of same-sex desire, with each emerging according to the context explored in a given work and the implied context of her readership. Das uses signifiers of an initially Euro-American identity politics of sexuality such as "straight" and "lesbian" in order to reference discourses predicated on the essential identity of the

"gay" or "lesbian" subject as initially conceived in "the West," which she describes metonymically as "British culture." At the same time, she aligns female–female desire not with an essential "lesbian" core, but with a set of experiences and practices arising from relationships between women, often facilitated by Nayar institutions like the *taravad*, representative of what she calls "Malayali culture." Das's oeuvre is not merely a repository of impossible contradictions, for different concepts frequently belong to different contextual systems. Metanarratives such as queer theory and feminism, which rely on generalization and universalism (a context-free system), are inadequate on their own to explain her multi-faceted portrayals of same-sex desire and womanhood respectively.

My Story and "Iqbal"

Das claims in the preface to *My Story*, her heavily embellished autobiography, that when she began writing the work in serial format she was hospitalized, with insufficient funds to pay for her treatment, and she believed that she was dying.[24] While the veracity of this account is questionable, *My Story* can and has been read in the context of financial need and recklessness derived from a sense of impending death, with chapter-by-chapter sensationalism representing a desperate attempt to ensure sales. Chapters such as "She lay near me holding my body close to hers,"[25] in which Das describes her adolescent liaison with an 18-year-old woman, are deliberately provocative. The chapter begins:

> A friend of my family had warned me against associating with an 18-year-old girl residing in a college hostel, but when I went there with my mother, visiting her friends, I met her and felt instantly drawn towards her. I did not wish to displease my mother's Professor-friends who had cautioned me against the girl who was different from others. When her eyes held mine captive in a trance, for a reason that I could not fathom, then I felt excited. Her skin was bronzed with the sun. She was like an animal that had exposed itself to the magnificent fury of the seasons, the suns, the rains and the harsh dry winds that sweep the sand of deserts.[26]

This introduction aligns the girl with conceptions of sexuality as constitutive of identity and orientation, a formulation that Das often depicts originating from the "West." The girl is said to be "different" from others, perhaps indicating her ontological singularity as a "lesbian." That this is voiced by Das's "mother's Professor-friends," metonymic for academic elucidations of difference, is hardly

accidental, but Das is simultaneously intent on suggesting this girl's lesbian identity and refraining from such appraisals. The latter stance is embodied in her reluctance to explicitly articulate how the girl is different, instead tacitly elaborating this difference through her location in the college hostel, a common site of same-sex desire in the Indian imaginary, and the affirmation that the girl is seducing her with "her eyes." As well as creating a sense of aberration (perhaps recalling essentialist medical discourses of homosexuality), Das implies that the girl is entirely natural, and these positions are not deemed incompatible. Instead, each is synecdochic for the different contextual systems that form Das's subjectivity. In contrast with narratives of vociferousness and specificity, we find reticence and indeterminacy, captured in her disingenuous claim that she "could not fathom" the reasons for her sexual excitement. The indirect description of the girl through the extended simile of the animal adumbrates her inscrutability, with the hyperbole of "magnificent fury" and "harsh dry winds"[27] insistently locating her in the ineffable natural world.

Das's work is replete with tropes drawn from nature, many of which are explicitly linked to her rustic upbringing in Nalapat, her ancestral home in Malabar. Whereas Nalapat is the context of bucolic pleasures, cities like Calcutta and Cochin are associated with suffering. In one article she opposes her past in "the hallowed precincts of my ancestral house," with its "hedges burdened with flowery creepers, the lichened idols in the snake shrine, the empty granaries and the pond beside which the water fowl live," to her present existence in "polluted," "noisy," and rampantly commercial Cochin.[28] The natural imagery in Das's description of the girl in *My Story* renders her metonymic for a whole range of pleasures associated with the context of the author's childhood. Das goes on to describe the passion she feels when the girl seduces her on a train:

> She lay near me holding my body close to hers. Her fingers traced the outlines of my mouth with a gentleness which I had never dreamt of finding. She kissed my lips then, and whispered, you are so sweet, so very sweet, I have never met anyone so sweet, my darling, my little darling.[29]

The emotional dimension is again emphasized; the girl's "gentleness" is depicted with gushing hyperbole, while the incantatory repetition of "sweet" and the infantilizing "my little darling" endows her with a maternal role. Writing *My Story* in her forties, Das depicts this scene almost proleptically, conveying how she has been starved of affection

in the patriarchal nuclear family; if the girl is subsequently sexualized, this remains subordinated to Das's need for love. Das proceeds to make explicit comparisons between the affection she received from the older women of her family and that which she enjoys with the girl on the train:

> It was the first kiss of its kind in my life. Perhaps my mother may have kissed me when I was an infant but after that none, not even my grandmother, had bothered to kiss me. I was unnerved. I could hardly breathe. She kept stroking my hair and kissing my face and throat all that night while sleep came to me in snatches and with fever. You are feverish, she said, before dawn, your mouth is hot. [30]

In *A Childhood in Malabar* Das evokes her close relationship with Ammamma, her maternal grandmother: "Ammamma was the only person who caressed me. I had value and stature only in her eyes."[31] It is clear that the denial of this doting intimacy in *My Story* aims to create pathos, and this depiction of the sexual encounter is more interested in exploring the emotions of the narrator and prescribing a particular affective response in the reader than it is in creating stable truths and identities. The tentative nature of Das's rhetoric—"Perhaps," "may have"—is an admission of her own narratorial unreliability. Whether or not she was actually kissed is unimportant—what is crucial is our reaction to the statement that she was not. Later, Das remarks, "It seemed to me that the older girl was haunting me with her voice and with her smile,"[32] and the emotional dimensions of this experience continue to haunt the narrative when she meets her prospective husband, a relative who has impressed her with his correspondence. The disparity with her female lover could not be more marked: "He made me sit near him and he quoted from Huxley and Bertrand Russell. He was thin, walking with a stoop and had bad teeth. But he looked intellectual."[33] In contradistinction to "the older girl," the feral progeny of nature, Madhava Das seems to be the product of unnatural confinement. The young Kamala is anguished by her first sexual contact with him:

> Before I left for Calcutta, my relative pushed me into a dark corner behind a door and kissed me sloppily near my mouth. He crushed my breasts with his thick fingers. Don't you love me, he asked me, don't you like my touching you . . . . I felt hurt and humiliated. All I said was "goodbye." [34]

Unlike the unnamed girl, Das's future husband is rough and crude; if Das was filled with desire and longing by her female lover, here she is merely "hurt and humiliated." The emotional contrast could not be greater, but it has been overlooked in most criticism dealing with *My Story*.

Perhaps Das's unwillingness to categorize her female lover in terms of her "orientation" reflects a larger reluctance to embrace the substantive worth of identitarian taxonomies. According to this formulation, Das is not exulting in "lesbianism" *per se* but suggesting a binary opposition that has on one side female–female tenderness and sorority and on the other the restrictive and oppressive nature of male–female marriage. This is clear from the unabashed dichotomization of the behavior of the girl on the train and that of Das's future husband, which fall neatly into dyads like natural/unnatural, tenderness/roughness, attraction/repulsion, and pleasure/pain. This strategy would enable a "local feminist interpretation" privileging patriarchal oppression above all other concerns, with far less scope for an analysis premised on female–female desire. Yet once again Das thwarts this unilateral reading within the narrative: three paragraphs after her encounter with the girl, she writes, "My favourite author at that time was Oscar Wilde and my favourite poem the 'Ballad of Reading Gaol'. He [her future husband] talked about homosexuality with frankness."[35] The oblique reference to Oscar Wilde's 1895 impeachment for "gross indecency" under Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, which among other things expanded the definition of prosecutable male-male sexual behavior, recalls the increasingly common late Victorian understanding of love and sex between men and between women as constitutive of a distinctive morphology of persons. Madhava Das proposes an analogous twentieth-century psychosexual classification, noting, "Many of us pass through that stage,"[36] implying that the encounter between Das and her girl lover can be labeled "adolescent homosexuality." Hence the young women's short-lived liaison is metonymic for the natural world and those local formulations of same-sex desire which do not conceive of female–female sexual relations as grounds for an identity, *as well as* biologically essentialist, initially Euro-American discourses of lesbianism and medicalization which insist on the ontological singularity of a woman who has sex with women. Clearly, Das is not staging an opposition between these two positions but rather pointing to the syncretic formation of her own subjectivity by means of two different contextual

systems: a childhood in the *taravad* at Nalapat and her exposure to "British culture," language, and literature through her Anglophone education.

If Das shows she conceives of female–female desire syncretically, both as an essential identity based on sexuality ("lesbianism") and a nameless and indeterminate series of sexual practices aligned with emotion, the natural world, and "Malayali culture," she is also capable of juxtaposing the acceptance of same-sex desire with mistrust. In "Composition," she writes:

> I asked my husband,
> am I hetero
> am I lesbian
> or am I just plain frigid?
> He only laughed.
> For such questions
> probably there are no answers
> or else
> the answers must emerge
> from within.[37]

Das's questions imply a belief in the validity of labels like "straight," "hetero," and "lesbian" to constitute identity, also suggesting that these forms of self-definition are desirable for their explanatory capacity. In response, her husband juxtaposes two explications which evoke different contextual systems: sexual desire is either nameless and unfathomable—"For such questions/ probably there are no answers"—or it does indeed "emerge/ from within." According to the second formulation, sexual subjectivity can be mapped onto identity in order to provide the certitude that Das desires. If the nomenclature of sexual orientation is considered metaphysically here, in a sympathetic and earnest tone, the subsequent stanza abruptly shifts to the concrete and sardonic:

> I have lost my best friend
> to a middle-aged queer.
> The lesbians hiss their love at me.[38]

Now the "lesbians" are cast in an absurd light, heightened by the ugly onomatopoeia of "hiss" and its incongruous collocation with "love," a juxtaposition which implies that a beautiful expression of "lesbian

love" is oxymoronic. The short, staccato lines emphasize the jarring and disjunctive quality of Das's loss and her antipathy for both the "middle-aged queer" and "the lesbians." It is striking that, having only moments before implied sympathy with identities of "homosexuality," here she describes them in a condemnatory tone. Yet she is not dismissing these identities *per se* but only insofar as they impinge on her own existence. Subsequently she clarifies that she is not rejecting "lesbianism" but rather all amorous attachments: "Love/ I no longer need." Instead of constituting a disquisition on sexuality, the poetic context is clearly a delineation of Das's failure to achieve sexual and affective fulfillment. Within this context, value judgments on sexuality are of importance merely insofar as they serve to emphasize this failure.

If same-sex desire, particularly between women, often acts as a trope which accentuates the unsatisfactory emotional dimensions of male–female relationships, it may receive indifferent treatment when depicted outside such a context. A particularly pertinent example is in one of Das's drawings, which depicts two naked "lesbians at a window." Although the expression on their faces is intimate, almost beatific, they are watched by a bird that is labeled "dubious."[39] Indeed, Das's attitude toward "lesbianism" sometimes verges on dismissiveness, as evinced in a 1992 interview with P. P. Raveendran:

> Feminism as the Westerns see it is different from the feminism I sense within myself. Western feminism is an anti-male stance . . . Most of the feminists I met outside the country were lesbians – out and out lesbians. I tried to find out. I experiment with everything. I tried to find out if I were a lesbian, if I could respond to a woman. I failed. I must speak the truth. I believe we must abandon a thing if it has no moral foundation whether it be a belief, a political system or a religious system.[40]

George considers whether or not this admission ought to disallow the queering of the author, ultimately concluding that Das's "slipperiness" provides fertile ground for a queer methodology,[41] but she does not acknowledge that Das is primarily rejecting lesbianism as part of a wider critique of "Western feminism." In this context, the reductionist remark "Most of the feminists I met outside the country were lesbians" is deeply demagogic, as it encourages the conservative reader to extend his or her distaste for lesbianism to a more generalized rejection of Western "amorality" and "feminism." Das does not seem to be discrediting "lesbian identity" *per se* but using

it as part of an inductive argument against Occidental ideological "systems."

Das's representations of female–female desire and even womanhood are clearly dependent on contexts of narrative and readership. One could argue that she chose to write poetry in English because the language, like the form, is frequently aligned with universalism, and her Anglophone poetry often renders her persona metonymic for the universal suffering woman, as in "An Introduction":

> I met a man, loved him. Call
> Him not by any name, he is every man
> Who wants a woman, just as I am every
> Woman who seeks love.[42]

To claim that this is a context-sensitive approach to the requirements of an Anglophone readership would be exaggerated, but Das's English-language poetry can certainly be forcefully universalist. In Malayalam she focuses more readily on the specificity of "local traditions" like casteism and *hijras*, without openly divorcing her observations from their immediate context. Yet characteristic of her ever-shifting tone, "An Introduction" also adopts a disparate, context-sensitive approach to women's suffering:

> I asked for love, not knowing what else to ask
> For, he drew a youth of sixteen into the
> Bedroom and closed the door. He did not beat me
> But my sad woman-body felt so beaten.
> The weight of my breasts and womb crushed me. I shrank
> Pitifully. Then I wore my shirt and my
> Brother's trousers, cut my hair short and ignored
> My womanliness. Dress in sarees, be girl,
> Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook[43]

The context here is more specific in both an ontological and thematic sense. By "ontological specificity," I mean that Das is not concerned with the more generalizable aspects of being "every woman," but rather with being a woman according to Hindu models of the feminine, here represented by the synecdochic "saree." Analogously, she is preoccupied with her own suffering, and instead of acting as an idealist signifier of the human condition, identity is but a series of conventions which she draws on to emphasize her personal plight. "Woman" is

juxtaposed with "sad," just as "womanliness" is the object of a neglectful husband who ignores it; the female identity is invoked principally in order to arouse the reader's sympathy. Das's frustration is captured by the incongruous repetition of the imperative "be" accompanied by nouns without determiners, as though roles like "embroiderer" were timeless and self-evident, without requiring further specification. Here, then, she emphatically rejects identities that do not, at least ostensibly, emerge from her own subjectivity.

Hence it is problematic to label Das "queer" for several reasons. Firstly, her notion of queerness as a male–male desiring identity coexists with indeterminate portrayals of same-sex desire which elude verbalization and politics. Secondly, she is accepting of queerness when it seems to emerge naturally from her own subjectivity and dismissive of it when it impinges on her existence—for example, in the form of a husband desiring boys or "lesbians" attempting to seduce her when she has supposedly renounced love. Das is not being apolitical but highlighting how all ideology is the product of personal subjectivity, which in her case comprises multiple, often apparently contradictory, contextual systems. This syncretic multiplicity is quite opposed to the superimposition of a totalizing schema on individuals; even when such a schema is considered, it is almost invariably belied within the same text. Das herself was an Indian educated in English literature, "Oscar Wilde," and "homosexuality," as well as the unvoiced and indeterminate female–female relationships in the *taravad*. The latter are represented at length in her short story "The Sandal Trees," as discussed in the last part of this chapter.

Before turning to "The Sandal Trees," Das's Anglophone short story "Iqbal" merits consideration. In this text the eponymous male protagonist is sexually involved with the female narrator's husband, and Das adopts a largely negative stance toward the male–male love affair. That this is context-sensitive is clear, for the story is framed by the narrator's consciousness, and Das crafts the narrative around her suffering. This may partly account for the deadening silence on "Iqbal" 's engagement with male–male desire in recent Indian literary criticism, of which A. N. Dwivedi's reading is exemplary: "In reality Iqbal is a lover of [the narrator], and she too guesses it correctly. She says to Iqbal thus: 'You are jealous of me'."[44] On the contrary, the individual who arouses jealousy in the story is the narrator's husband, for he is desired and claimed by both his wife and Iqbal, resulting in a masculinist love triangle through which her distress must be read.

If the portrayal of the male–male relationship is refracted by the immediate narrative context of woman's suffering, it is also located within a long-established tradition of patriarchal poetry. Iqbal is "a poet, a minor, an unknown one perhaps, but a poet all the same,"[45] whose Arabic Islamic name affiliates him to the early twentieth-century figure Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), the national poet of Pakistan, commonly referred to as Muffakir-e-Pakistan ("The Thinker of Pakistan"). Das also implicitly links Iqbal to the male–male desire of the Urdu *ghazal*, for he has a "white face . . . pretty with its black curls, its full red lips and the nose that was delicately transparent. Iqbal should have been a girl." The association is reinforced by the fact that the narrator's husband is significantly older than the "young man" whom he loves,[46] although in this case it is the latter who writes love poems, one of which is discovered by the narrator:

> Your flesh was the flesh of the moon, dear love,
> But I was an orphan nurtured by the moon,
> I drank the white milk of the moon,
> And suckled her dry.[47]

The poem is extremely ambiguous, but the moon may indicate the desirability of the male beloved, echoing the use of the trope to designate the perfection of lovers, male and female, in Urdu poetry. For example, one of Mir's couplets states, "Us mah-e caudah ki dūrī ne/ Do hī din mē kiyā halāl hamē" ("Distance from that fourteen-day-old full moon/ Killed me in just two days"[48]), ricocheting, like the above composition, between the metaphorical and the literal. Iqbal's poem also personifies the moon as a mother; that she is explicitly gendered female and gets "suckled dry" by the thirsty male may suggest that, once her utility is at an end, she is discarded in favor of homoeroticism and the moon-like beloved. In turn, this expresses the exclusion felt by the female narrator, who is identified with the moon by the fact that she is pregnant. The image of male–male love is profoundly negative, but this may partly be because it is located within a context where it is synonymous with the physical and figurative banishment of women, where it is also immanently linked to a male-authored and male-dominated literary canon. This is not representative of a sweeping rejection of "homosexuality" but rather a context-sensitive approach by means of which male–male desire becomes the apotheosis of masculinism

within the domain of women's suffering and patriarchal literary histories.

"The Sandal Trees" ("*Chandana Marangal*")

In 1988 Das wrote the Malayalam short story "*Chandana Marangal*," which was translated into English as "The Sandal Trees" by V. C. Harris and C. K. Mohamed Umer in 1995. Because Das collaborated in the translation and approved of the final version, I have deemed it acceptable to analyze the work in English. In "The Sandal Trees" Das devotes far more attention to female–female desire than in her prior writings. Sheela, the 50-something narrator and protagonist of the story, is married to a man who is significantly older than she. The main events of the narrative take place when she is in her fifties and he is already in his seventies. It emerges that in adolescence she had a relationship with a girl of similar age named Kalyanikutty, and the narrative shuttles between Sheela's present marital dissatisfaction and her blissful past. In the narrative present, when the middle-aged Kalyanikutty returns to meet Sheela, she asks the latter to abandon her husband for her, yet Sheela refuses and the story ends with her hopeless longing for her erstwhile lover.

The unconventional female–female friendship is certainly not a recent innovation in Malayalam film and literature, and the belief that women have enjoyed a higher status in Kerala than elsewhere in India contains at least a kernel of truth. The epic poem "*Chilappathikaram*," composed around the beginning of the Common Era in Tamilnad, but endlessly adapted in Kerala, insists on the autonomy of its female protagonist, Kannagi, and is readable as a panegyric on the glories of womanhood. The "*Vadakkan Pattukal*," or the "Northern Ballads," prominent from the sixteenth century in Kerala, contain powerful heroines as well as heroes. Referring to a moment where one such heroine, Unniyarcha, arms herself with a dagger, K. M. George notes how women in medieval Kerala were taught combat in the military gymnasia, or *kalans*, which is reflected in many of the ballads.[49] The nineteenth and twentieth centuries also include many literary examples of powerful female protagonists, like the eponymous heroines of Chandu Menon's novel *Indulekha*, published in 1889, and Uroob's 1954 novel *Ummachu*. It could be argued that Kalyanikutty is a descendant of the powerful, occasionally militant woman of much Malayalam literature, for Sheela's husband groups her among women who "sow destruction,"

"Furies . . . [who] can't help destroying everything."[50] Perhaps the most notable precursor to Das's story, though, is V. T. Nandakumar's 1974 novel, *Randu Penkuttikal* (*Two Girls*), which describes the love affair between two young women. Vanita and Kidwai cite his preface to the Second Edition:

> Lesbianism—which means a love affair between two women—is now ubiquitous. In my opinion this passion is likely to be widespread among the young women of Kerala who, by nature, are extraordinarily sensitive. Such relationships have some healthy and positive potential hence they are important.
>
> . . .
>
> Let me conclude by praying for the growth and prosperity of lesbianism.[51]

Randu Penkuttikal is a likely forerunner of "The Sandal Trees," for both narratives present favorable depictions of female–female desire, yet both insist on the ultimate inescapability of male–female unions, brought about by the machinations of society. This is quite at odds with the wider literary trend of portraying female–female desire as immature and ephemeral, corrupt and unnatural, to be justly ousted by "heterosexual" marriage.

Indeed, "The Sandal Trees" suggests the endurance or even permanence of female–female desire. Kalyanikutty is metonymic for an idealized love between women as it exists imaginatively in the past and the future, at her most vivid when conjured by Sheela's memory:

> What came up in my mind was the old Kalyanikutty, my bosom friend who embraced me and dropped hot tears on my neck and shoulders. She was a rustic girl then. A girl whose skin had the colour of sandalwood. That lean girl who zoomed off on the swing tied to a high branch of the mango tree in my yard.[52]

Kalyanikutty, the woman-child (the suffix "*kutty*" means "girl" in Malayalam), often seems more of a metonym for a range of pleasures, themselves intimately bound up with a context embedded in Sheela's subjectivity, than the possessor of a substantive identity or "sexuality." Crucially, both the women's relationship and the context in which it exists are irrecuperable in the narrative present, only existing through recollection, anticipation, and deferral, in antithetical relation to Sheela's marital misery, which Das suggests can never be alleviated.

Like the "girl" in *My Story*, the Kalyanikutty of Sheela's past is associated with the natural, yet she is also rooted in "local" Malayali tradition in a manner recalling Das's nostalgia for her own childhood at Nalapat. The two girls become lovers amid surroundings that evoke Das's ancestral home: "We were bathing in the swimming-pond. In front of her gaze I suddenly felt shy. I felt my buttocks and my bosom trembling under her steady gaze."[53] The swimming pond and bathing tank are locations to which Das returns repeatedly, both in *My Story* and her journalism. Restricted as they are to women, they provide a sensuous environment in which female–female desire can flourish. If nothing else, they enable an intimacy which seems to have been the hallmark of Das's *taravad*. In *A Childhood in Malabar*, for instance, she describes an ambiguous, perhaps sexual relationship which hinges on the bathing tank at Nalapat:

> Madhavi Amma . . . kept her distance from everyone. Only a woman named Velakathara Kalyani somehow became the object of Madhavi Amma's affection. They often spent time together in the tiled shed over the bathing tank at Nalapat. Kalyani had obviously undertaken the tasks of massaging Madhavi Amma's body with oil and rubbing perfumed oil into her hair. The shed was usually locked from inside. But I could make out that slightly mannish voice even when I stood under the ilanji tree directly outside.[54]

Das resists a politics of articulation and definition by withholding both value judgments and identitarian labels, and the closed cow shed is a metaphor for the refusal to identify the women as "lesbian." Instead, polysemic signifiers like the locked door may bespeak sexual intimacy within, just as the masculine voice may suggest the androgyny popularly associated with female–female sexuality. What is most interesting is that these relations, while undiscussed, are noiselessly accepted by other members of the *taravad*. Thus Das's upbringing and exposure to Nayar traditions provide a context within "The Sandal Trees" in which female–female desire is neither labeled nor criticized.

"The Sandal Trees," although implicitly linking these unnamed practices to the *taravad* and Nayar tradition, also points more unambiguously to an essential identity predicated on female–female desire, but these apparently divergent portrayals of love between women are not oppositional. While Das seems to be invoking a different contextual system premised on identity politics, she does not use the word "homosexual" or "lesbian," partly because the work was originally written in Malayalam, which has no direct equivalents. Yet Kalyanikutty

does hint at the inescapability of sexual orientation to Sheela: "I know who you are. You know that I know. And I know that you know that I know."[55] Later, she remonstrates:

> Sheela, you're repeating untruths over and over. And you end up believing your own lies. You don't dare be yourself. You've never been bold enough to admit that you love me. You too know that you'll get peace and happiness only when you live with me.[56]

Kalyanikutty's accusations resemble the initially Euro-American charge of "being in denial" about one's sexuality, itself predicated on the presuppositions of biological essentialism. Sheela and Kalyanikutty seem attracted to both men and women, but their romantic and sexual desire for each other is all-conquering. When the 50-something Kalyanikutty returns, the inescapability of her lust for women is suggested by an apparently sexual affair with the 19-year-old Ammini, daughter of Kalyanikutty's ex-husband, Sankharan. Ammini's mother condemns the liaison as "unnatural,"[57] again synecdochic for the initially Euro-American medicalization of sexuality. At the same time, by refusing to use the words "bisexual," "lesbian," or "homosexual" and abstaining from overt signifiers of identity politics, Das shows how these concepts may play out syncretically in "non-Western," non-Anglophone contexts.

Das describes Sheela and Kalyanikutty's first sexual encounter and Sheela's present frustration with her husband in coextensive detail, and the sexuality of the latter is pathologized. His "private parts" "hang loose and look unsewn," his penis is "the figure of a rotten bitter-gourd,"[58] his teeth are "ugly," "red," and "broken," he is very short-sighted,[59] and "the varicose veins on his legs appeared swollen and tangled like the fruits of a jackfruit tree."[60] The exacting description of each body part recalls a medical examination appropriate to Sheela's profession as a doctor, yet much of the imagery is also drawn from nature. Das is mimetically reproducing how "deviant sexuality" is often defined by means of medical terminology, or the figuration of decay, monstrosity, and perversion in the natural world, although here it is transferred from the "lesbian" to the "heterosexual" partner. Sheela remarks of her husband, "My body, exhausted after the day's duties, cannot stand the ugly, unnatural weight of lust,"[61] wherein "lust" is metonymic for the heavy male on top of the "exhausted" female body, yet this is only partly a denunciation of patriarchal sexuality. It may also imply that the most natural sexual encounter of all

is one that takes place between two equally matched bodies, namely those of two women. This is reinforced by the sense of mutual desire and possession informing Das's depictions of their adolescent lovemaking. If Kalyanikutty tries to possess Sheela's body, at first "a living corpse" but ultimately sexually responsive,[62] Sheela also specifically claims Kalyanikutty's body as her own: "The roughnesses and tendernesses of her body became all mine."[63] The insistence on corporeal mutuality and reciprocity as opposed to the one-sidedness of male–female sexual relations obviates the charge that female–female sex is unnatural, heightened by the anti-climacticism surrounding the possibility that Kalyanikutty and Sheela are in fact half sisters, which is swiftly brushed over and forgotten within the narrative.

Like "Iqbal," though, "The Sandal Trees" is more interested in the emotional than the sexual. It would be wrong to place Das's meditations on sexuality in absolute subordination to her evocations of loneliness and love, yet they are in many ways transformed within the affective context. Turning to Sheela's seduction in girlhood by Kalyanikutty (whose name and desires undoubtedly echo those of Velakathara Kalyani), one at first recalls the scene on the train in *My Story*; in both cases, the narrator is passive, seduced with kisses on the face and neck, but here Sheela is initially more resistant than the prostrate Das of the autobiography:

> It was then that I noticed Kalyanikutty's eyes. They shone with a touch of light blue across the high iris. Tiny drops of sweat appeared over her upper lip. I discovered that she had lost control over her limbs. Using all her strength, she pushed me down on the floor of the pond-house daubed with cow dung. Then, sending a deep thrill down my spine, she covered every inch of my body with kisses that really hurt. I shut my eyes in shame and humiliation. I don't remember how long I lay there like a living corpse under her assault. For ages I was a slave to her throbbing hands and legs. After that I became her beloved. The moistness and taste of her mouth became mine. The roughnesses and tendernesses of her body became mine. Finally, my mother, who could not find any other way to separate us, married me off to a rich and educated relative.[64]

It could be argued that this sexual encounter is of instrumental rather than substantive relevance. This is evident from the violent disjunction between the extended, lyrical description of Sheela and Kalyanikutty's lovemaking, full as it is of vivid imagery, and the factual, almost perfunctory sentence which recounts Sheela's obligatory marriage. Such

syntactic strategies make it clear that Das is primarily interested in the affective contrast, and indeed the potency, of what I have called two different contextual systems—Nayar rusticity and a patriarchal, urban modernity—both as they structure Sheela's subjectivity and the narrative itself. Paralleling *My Story*, Das's description of these passions overshadows the arrival of Sheela's husband, their honeymoon, and the remainder of their life together. Once married, Sheela contrasts her husband unfavorably with Kalyanikutty, yet here the disparity is more explicit than in *My Story*:

> When I compared his mouth that smelt of beer, cigarette and onion with hers that had the sweet smell of durva grass, he failed. However hard I tried, I could not forget the way she had caressed me, pressed her fingers hard into me and satisfied me with her lips, all with the intention of giving me pleasure.[65]

The self-interest of Sheela's husband diverges markedly from Kalyanikutty's insistence on pleasuring her lover. Once again, the familiar dyad of the synthetic (cigarettes) and the natural (*durva* grass) appears, but here it is more obviously metonymic for suffocation within a monogamous, Westernized marriage in the city and the analeptic freedom of the Nayar *taravad*.

The two partners are further polarized by the use of the imagery of the sandal tree: whereas in the case of Kalyanikutty sandalwood is used to describe the healthy glow of her skin, with Sheela's husband the tree depicts the wall of silence that has grown between them. Kalyanikutty by association is the sandal tree, a profoundly concrete metaphor which also enforces physical distance, yet Sheela's husband ultimately figures her as a "shadow" which "had fallen between us,"[66] a nebulous and intangible obstacle to marital accord. This duality parallels how Kalyanikutty is both a physical character and a ghostly presence, a metonym for alternative histories and more pleasurable ways of life, created by Sheela's subjectivity. It is clear that, unlike in *My Story* and other texts which deal with transient female–female sexuality, Das intends in "The Sandal Trees" to haunt the full length of the narrative with the specter of the relationship that might have been. However, the duration of this love affair, and the fact that it is never consummated in the narrative present, also increase its utility as the inverse of Sheela's present relationship with her husband. The only scene of lovemaking that occurs in the story is between two women, and it is not recuperable; it must remain in the past, diametrically opposed to

the sexual disgust that Sheela experiences in marriage. If the narrative context of "The Sandal Trees" is an exploration of women's suffering, especially in the patriarchal institution of *grihasthashram*,[67] female–female desire is dichotomized with this condition in its physical and affective dimensions. The struggle unfolding in Sheela's consciousness, undoubtedly reflecting Das's own, is between two contextual systems which are rendered metonymically by the bourgeois, modern, urbane husband who attends the Rotary Club and the girlish, "rustic" sweetheart of Sheela's adolescence.[68] If the same-sex relationship represents intimacy, sorority, nature, and fulfillment, as experienced in the context of Das's *taravad*, these form a neat antithesis to the alienation and dissatisfaction experienced in the context of heterosexual marriage and modernity, which is itself indelibly marked by a distant husband and an emotionally unavailable city.

Thus we are quite prepared for the wistfulness and poignant sense of loss with which "The Sandal Trees" draws to a close:

> I was transformed into a young lass who embraced her girlfriend and sought the blissful rapture of her kiss. A girl who found heavenly pleasures in the bodily touch of her beloved—her beloved who, having swum and bathed in the pond for hours together, smelt and tasted of weeds and mosses, water lilies and medicinal herbs. "Oh, my love, how can I live now?" I whispered to the darkness that slowly spread in the car.[69]

The hyperbole of this description suggests that the narrator has fully embraced the nostalgia, like Das's own for Nalapat and the *taravad*, which she resisted earlier in the narrative. As Sheela takes refuge in this imaginative haven, her husband addresses her for one last time as Dr. Sheela, a final reminder of the distance between them. If he is physically present but emotionally absent, Kalyanikutty is just the opposite. Ending with the valedictory sound of her "girlish laughter,"[70] the narrative suggests that in Sheela's consciousness she will always be "*kutty*," rooted in the *taravad* and a halcyon past in the natural world. It is in contradistinction to this idealized history that the suffering of the narrative present and the prospect of a degrading future are so caustically described.

Conclusion

I have attempted to adjudicate between queer and the more "heterosexist" "local feminist" readings of Das's work, arguing that these

approaches tend toward universalism and do not capture the extent of her context-sensitivity. That is to say, like Ramanujan's father, she is capable of "holding in one brain" diverse conceptions of same-sex desire and womanhood which stem from and respond to different contextual systems in the external world. Das's citations of homosexuality and lesbianism as essential identities are partly indebted to the influence of "British culture"; conversely, construing same-sex desire as a series of non-identitarian practices seems rooted in the context of a Nayar upbringing and Keralan traditions. Yet this is not a neat binary, for "lesbianism" is often adapted in the "local" context so that the label itself disappears but the signification remains, and Das limns the possibility of essentialist Malayali equivalents. Moreover, female–female desire is portrayed positively or negatively according to individual narratives, reduced to an ugly and unwanted "hiss" in the context of Das's renunciation of love in "Composition," or becoming life-affirming in "The Sandal Trees," where it represents past and possibly future emancipation.[71]

To reiterate, many critics inveigh against Das's putative hypocrisy or inconsistency, exemplified by Vrinda Nabar's expostulation: "To claim that one changes too fast for any philosophy seems highly self-delusive."[72] What exasperates such commentators is that Das shirks the universalism which would make her an appropriate exponent of an all-pervasive ideology. Instead, I have argued that her work represents not capricious inconstancy but a continual reappraisal of the object according to the contextual system it occupies. To claim that her oeuvre is context-sensitive has wider political significance as well. This approach, instead of eliding moments of apparent incompatibility, allows for the possibility that two apparently oppositional worldviews can coexist; in "Composition" and "An Introduction," Das thematizes the process by which intellectual positions seem to emerge from different facets of her consciousness. In her repeated juxtaposition of such views, without the ultimate privileging of one over the other, she suggests the syncretic construction of her literary subjectivity. Where this informs her depictions of same-sex desire, we find a compelling literary correlative for the "unrationalized coexistence," the endless interactions and mutual reinventions, which underpin the expression of ostensibly contradictory "sexualities" in India today.

CHAPTER 3

"The Bliss I Could Portray": Elliptical and Declamatory Male–Male Desire in the Work of Vikram Seth

Introduction

Vikram Seth is widely celebrated as one of the greatest living Indian writers in English and his work has attracted significant attention, especially surrounding his willful flouting of postmodernist literary trends. If *The Golden Gate* (1986), his early novel in rhyming poetry, was quite out of keeping with a Euro-American climate of free verse, the voluminous realist prose epic *A Suitable Boy* (1993) flummoxed a generation of readers reared on the aesthetic excesses of *Midnight's Children*[1] and its successors. In *The New York Times Magazine*, Richard Woodward wrote, "Deliberately plain and uninvolved in its syntax and psychology, 'A Suitable Boy' reads as though Flaubert, Joyce and Nabokov had never existed. It isn't so much post-modern as pre-modern."[2] Marked out as unfashionably realist and unfashionably long in both encomiastic and dismissive analyses, *A Suitable Boy* is often analyzed as a stylistic anomaly whose themes do not merit expansive treatment. The novel is so wide-ranging that any discussion is significantly constrained by the requisite concision of the literary review, and, while some scholarly publications[3] do attempt a more comprehensive approach, there remain many lacunae in Seth studies.

The omission that concerns me here is the theme of male–male desire; in Vijay Singh Thakur's discussion of *A Suitable Boy*,[4] the sexual dimension of the friendship between Maan and Firoz, two of the novel's male protagonists, is overlooked, while Pier Paolo Piciucco's analysis[5] only touches on male "homoeroticism," inhuming it in a

European history of gender and sexual indeterminacy. Suffice it to say that Seth's portrayals of love and sex between men warrant further investigation. Despite the pleasures of depicting male–male desire, described as "bliss" in *The Golden Gate*, I argue that his writing engages with it in elliptical as well as declamatory ways. In some works these representational strategies coexist, while others unfold in one or the other mode. Often palpably syncretic, such strategies are engendered and facilitated by the portrayal of an initially Euro-American homosexuality and longer-standing South Asian formulations like *yaari* and *nawabi* history. This construction of the elliptical and the declamatory using elements of Indian and Euro-American culture unsettles the deleterious association of "Western modernity" with vocal gay activism and "retrograde India" with the silencing and intolerance of same-sex desire. Describing Seth's early volume of poetry *Mappings*, for instance, Rita Joshi writes, "He also refers to his bisexual leanings in this collection—though passé in the West, homosexuality is still closeted rather than open in India."[6]

In an interview with Sheela Reddy in 2006, published in *Outlook India Magazine*, Seth replied to the question, "Do you feel any self-censorship in writing a novel about gay lovers?" with, "I did, but no longer. When I was younger I was more concerned about the effect on my family and what people would think of me."[7] Despite this implication of gradual fictional and autobiographical "outing," Seth's early work is far from "closeted," for reticency coexists with overt expressions of love and sex between men within individual poems and across *Mappings* as a whole. The epigraphic sonnet of *An Equal Music*, written almost twenty years later, evidences a similar juxtaposition; ostensibly eliding and heterosexualizing Seth's relationship with Philippe Honoré, a lover of ten years who inspired the novel, it is also an acrostic of his name.[8]

Yet it is true that Seth's public persona has become much more politicized in recent years; since the early 2000s, he has recognized the importance of promulgating his sexuality in India, giving his mother, Leila Seth, permission to mention it in her autobiography.[9] He also famously co-drafted an open letter demanding the repeal of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, signed by 150 prominent Indians, including Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy, which concluded:

> We will move many steps closer to our goal of achieving a just, pluralistic and democratic society by the ending of Section 377, which is currently

> under challenge before the Delhi High Court. There should be no discrimination in India on the grounds of sexual orientation. In the name of humanity and of our Constitution, this cruel and discriminatory law should be struck down.[10]

The open letter was instrumental in achieving the reading down of Section 377 on July 2, 2009, also adding weight to the discourses of "gay rights" which have proliferated since the early 1990s. After the reinstatement of the law in late 2013, Seth appeared on the front cover of *India Today* holding a placard which read: "Not a criminal . . . To not be able to love the one you love is to have your life wrenched away."[11] This image not only questions the right to privacy but also recognizes its impossibility if one's sexuality is illegal. In a Foucaultian gesture, Seth is portrayed as a disheveled and unshaven prisoner, parodying the post-Victorian assumption that the interior deviance of the homosexual/criminal is immediately visible as an inscription on the external body, which is inseparable from the essentialist prohibition of "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" in Section 377. A developmental reading of Seth's burgeoning political militancy might identify an analogous trajectory of "outing" in his writing, culminating in the vocal defense of homosexuality in "Through Love's Great Power," a poem that makes direct reference to the rhetoric of unnaturalness and aberration of Section 377.[12] Yet this is disallowed by the elisions of his most recent collection of poetry: in *Summer Requiem*,[13] although almost every poem mourns the termination of Seth's relationship with Honoré, the latter is never mentioned by name and his gender is unarticulated.

Mappings

Mappings, Seth's first collection of poetry, was composed while he was a student at Oxford and Stanford and published in India by Purushottama Lal's diminutive Writer's Workshop in 1981. Some of these poems, such as "Six Octets" and "Progress Report," are elliptical, addressing the beloved using the second-person pronoun "you" and remaining ungendered, while others make recondite, tangential, and ultimately inscrutable allusions to what may or may not be love and sex between men. Two poems do refer to male–male love and sex overtly, however. In the autobiographical "Guest," Seth writes of an anonymous naked man whose "long-limbed body stirs my quiescent heart."[14] A burgeoning appreciation of physical eroticism is accompanied by affective arousal, climaxing in the line "I found I loved

him utterly instead," a hyperbolic statement whose declamatory force is intensified by its economical literalness. Subsequently, Seth's tone becomes more elliptical in his equivocal description of the encounter:

> But next day, warily,
> We coiled to snap or spring. Rash truth. To lie
> Still could have spared the trust; the warmth as well.[15]

The men's sexual contact is described using the polysemic metaphor of the coil, perhaps suggesting the moment of tension before desire is consummated—the second of doubt where intimacy can either be sought or shunned—or perhaps the inward and outward movements of penetrative sex. If the caesura of "Rash truth" seems to augur a change in tone and a potentially "rash" explication of the metaphor, there follows an unexpected meditation on emotion, a verbal screen that further conceals the explicit articulation of sex between men.

In the poem "Dubious" we find a similar juxtaposition of ellipsis with a more purposive confession, a direct meditation on Seth's bisexuality: "Some men like Jack/ And some like Jill;/ I'm glad I like them both; but still." Usually saturated with connotations of heterosexual intercourse and procreation in Anglo-American culture, the nursery rhyme of Jack and Jill is inverted to denote the hegemonic binary of heterosexuality/homosexuality. Recalling "Guest," Seth's tone is declamatory and unambiguous, yet the infantilism of the nursery rhyme trivializes his confession by equating it to the naive outpourings of a child. Similarly, what ought to be the poem's zenith, the moment of confession itself, is tersely offered as "I'm glad I like them both," immediately followed by caesura and a change in tone which truncate this revelation. Through these strategies, in tandem with creating a general tenor of playfulness and whimsicality, Seth elides the impact of the confession: if he does not take his own "freewheeling" sexuality seriously, his readers should follow suit, a position reinforced by the aporetic final stanza: "In the strict ranks/ Of Gay and Straight/ What is my status?/ Stray? Or Great?"[16] The double rhyme and transferred alliteration of "gay" and "straight," "stray" and "great," reconstitute the divisiveness of sexuality as farce, and the implied impossibility of a serious response is borne out by the poem's termination with three rhetorical questions.

If these two poems juxtapose declamatory and elliptical approaches to male–male desire, they provide a useful starting point for analyzing these contiguous modes of representation in Seth's subsequent writing. In its geographical indeterminacy and self-conscious subjectivism,

Mappings also underscores how depictions of love and sex between men do not simply arise from Seth's mimetic representations of the mores and proscriptions of a sociopolitical milieu, even when such phenomena are referred to in the text. Instead, each of his works presents male–male desire in palpably syncretic ways, both capturing the theme with verisimilitude and suggesting the encroachments and embellishments of a multilingual and demonstrably cosmopolitan authorial subjectivity.

The Golden Gate

The Golden Gate (1986), Vikram Seth's novel in verse, comprises 690 Onegin stanzas, or sonnets in iambic tetrameter, after the ababccd-deffegg pattern of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. Suffused with a nuanced appreciation of 1980s San Francisco and its citizens, Seth's epic poem was composed while he was studying at Stanford University. *The Golden Gate* seems to belong to a quintessentially American tradition, as self-consciously autobiographical elements like the author's foreignness or Indian origins are absent from the diegesis, and the protagonists are white with Anglo-Saxon names like John and Paul, Janet and Ed. The novel contains Seth's most detailed portrayal of love and sex between two men, Ed and Phillip, which masquerades as an essential component of a cross-section of 1980s San Franciscan life, by which time the city's "gay subculture . . . had gained visibility and political clout."[17] In an interview with Ginny Dougary, Seth noted, "It would have been as ludicrous not to include gay relationships in a book like The Golden Gate as it would have been not to include caste in a book about India."[18] According to this logic, if he is to write about the city panoptically, he must include encyclopedic documentation of its inhabitants, but this downplays the extent to which the poet's fictionalized San Francisco is mediated by his own origins and identifications.

When Ed and Phil first make love, Seth's depiction of the scene, with its tensions and doubt, is remarkably similar to that of "Guest":

> Good night." Ed fears to answer. Trembling,
> He moves his hand across the space
> – What terrifying miles – assembling
> His courage, touches Phillip's face
> And feels him tense up and go rigid.
> "I'm sorry," Ed says, in a frigid,
> Half-choking voice, "I thought you might –

I didn't mean – I mean – good night."
Taut with a cataleptic tension
They lie, unspeaking. Phil thinks, "Why
Be so uptight? He's a great guy.
I've never bothered with convention.
God! It's a year that I've been chaste . . .,"
And puts his arm around Ed's waist.[19]

Epitomizing the mock-heroic tone of the novel, the stanza deploys the epic idiom of "terrifying miles" and "cataleptic tension" to dramatize Ed's very real reluctance to embrace Phil, whom he presumes to be straight. Phil's thoughts are doubly bathetic: his language is markedly colloquial, contrasting with the grandiloquent epithets of the first half of the stanza, and the casualness of his decision to have sex with Ed makes the latter's terror absurd. These strategies seem indebted to the most celebrated mock-heroic work in English literature, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, whose author maintains aloofness from the English aristocracy he critiques via a sustained contrast between the heights of epic linguistic convention and the lows of petty human behavior. Seth's self-situation within the Anglo-American mock-heroic genre enables him to juxtapose the explicit presentation of homosexuality with the elision of sincerity, profundity, and extended psychological realism, a contiguity that appears to emerge directly from his mapping of the San Franciscan milieu.

In the following stanza this unilateralism emerges as untenable: San Franciscan gay identity is inevitably inflected by Seth's subjectivity, which expresses itself in self-consciously syncretic terms. Initially, the narrative provides an unambiguous statement of Ed and Phil's lovemaking, but this is swiftly interrupted:

4.34
Now, just as things were getting tenser,
And Ed and Phil were making love,
The imperial official censor
– Officious and imperious – drove
His undiscriminating panzer
Straight through the middle of my stanza.
Now, Gentle Reader, is it right
This swine should put my Muse to flight,
Rooting about among my pearly
Wisdom till he finds orts that he
Can gobble down with grunting glee?

> Forgive me, Reader, if I'm surly
> At having to replace the bliss
> I'd hoped I could portray, with this.[20]

The "imperial official censor" is not local, instead importing different cultural values into a foreign territory and recasting it in his own image. In light of Seth's view of homosexuality as an essential component of San Franciscan life, the metafictional trope of censorship is extraneous, bound by neither the law nor cultural regulation. The rhetorical flourish of the "panzer," an averral that male–male sex cannot be depicted, occurs despite the heightened levels of gay visibility and vocality which had emerged by the 1980s in San Francisco. Elizabeth Armstrong has explored this trajectory in the city as a microcosm of changing attitudes toward same-sex relationships in North America. In San Francisco, a handful of "homophile" organizations existing in the 1950s and 1960s, whose titles did not contain descriptors of sexual identity, were partially displaced by gay liberation in 1969 and "a gay identity movement" in the early 1970s. As a measure of this metamorphosis, between 1964 and 1994 "the number of nonprofit homosexual organizations . . . increased from 6 to 276."[21] There emerges a disjunction, then, between Seth's insistence on the compulsion to self-censor and his vision of an emancipated cityscape premised on liberal self-expression; the purportedly pure facsimile of San Franciscan gay life rendered by an impartial observer is revealed as the offspring of a syncretic authorial subjectivity. The divergent associations of the British Empire and the Nazi panzers of the Second World War produce the same sensations of violence and inexorability, which structure this elliptical moment. If these historical connections also underscore the hostility of the imperial censor to San Franciscan liberalism, the city's much-vaunted acceptance of gay men remains idealized. The second half of this chapter analyzes the development of this syncretism in "From the Babur Nama" and *A Suitable Boy*, where initially Euro-American accounts of homosexuality overlap and coexist with longer-standing South Asian narratives of male–male desire, whether to declamatory or elliptical effect.

"From the Babur-Nama, Memoirs of Babur, First Moghul Emperor of India"

Loosely based on the oft-published and -translated diaries of the founder of the Mughal dynasty in South Asia, Zahir-ud-din

Muhammad Babur (1483–1530), Seth's poem "From the Babur-Nama" was first published in the collection *The Humble Administrator's Garden* in 1985. Babur's memoirs, written in Persianized Chagatai Turkic, document his military, political, and personal exploits in, among other regions, his native Farghana (in present-day Central Asia) and Hindustan. Seth's poem is split into four discrete parts, with the first dwelling solely on Babur's love, "passion," and sexual attraction to a young man named Baburi. Conforming to and exceeding accurate translation, the poem is also bricolage, for its adjoining sections are drawn from nonconsecutive events in the *Babur Nama*.[22] Part Two jumps forward from Babur's infatuation to his experiences in "Hindustan," even though they are separated by numerous events and locations in the autobiography. Because Part One of Seth's poem lacks toponyms, we infer that it too takes place in Hindustan and not, as in the original text, in Farghana. Seth is not only reproducing an instance of male–male love, then, but implicitly relocating it in order to underline the historical South Asian acceptance of such attachments:

> A lad called Baburi lived in the camp-bazaar
> Odd how our names matched. I became fond of him –
> "Nay, to speak the truth, distracted after him."
> I had never before been this in love
> Or witnessed words expressive of passion, but now
> I wrote some Persian verses: "Never was lover
> So wretched, so enamoured, so dishonoured
> As I."[23]

Unusually for Seth, the poem is written in free verse, perhaps signaling its status as a loose translation of Babur's memoirs. This syncretic genealogy is not only latent in its form, for we also find the unambiguous rendition in English of an equally unambiguous Chagatai Turkic.[24] Signifiers of male–male desire such as "in love," a prepositional phrase reserved for romantic sentiments, unlike "love" alone, cannot be reduced to friendship or homosociality. Other lexical choices are revealing, too. Striving to recreate the antiquity of Chagatai Turkic, Seth includes the archaic "nay," and "lad," possibly derived from the Middle English "ladde," has been used since the 1300s in Britain with many different meanings, including a serving man (obsolete), a boy, youth or young man, a stable groom, a vigorous man (in modernity), and, in Scots, a sweetheart.[25] It is unlikely that these senses were foremost in Seth's mind when composing the poem, but the term has been most prominent in British English, drawing attention to its

own geographical rootedness more obviously than would "boy," which is much more widely used throughout the English-speaking world. Contiguous with such histories is the "camp-bazaar," perhaps recalling the "bazaar boys" who were the objects of affection of many fervent *rehkta* poems and *ghazals* (see Introduction). Babur's subsequent citation of Persian verses, again associable with the homoeroticism of the *ghazal*, expresses the extent of his adulation. By rendering an overt Central and South Asian history of male–male desire into explicit English phraseology, with its own etymologies and geopolitical specificity, Seth declaims love and passion between men in self-consciously syncretic ways.

A Suitable Boy

Despite its unwieldy length, *A Suitable Boy* (1993) was Vikram Seth's first work to enjoy widespread commercial and critical success. The novel depicts Mrs Mehra's quest to find a suitable husband for her young daughter Lata, also narrating the stories of other families like the Kapoors and the Chatterjis. Mostly taking place in the fictional town of Brahmpur, *A Suitable Boy* deals with polemical issues like Hindu-Muslim communalism and land reforms, in its scope attempting to capture the quiddity of postindependence India in the early 1950s. When Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* was published in 1981, Clark Blaise wrote that it "sounds like a continent finding its voice,"[26] insinuating that a polymorphous nation finds adequate representation in an equally polymorphous novel. While Rushdie's pluralism is in reality ambivalent, both embracing and eschewing totalization through devices like metafiction, *A Suitable Boy* ventriloquizes the subcontinent in the totalizing manner of the nineteenth-century realist novel. If truth is frequently undermined through narratorial intervention in *The Golden Gate*, in *A Suitable Boy* it remains unquestioned.

As Seth remarked to Amit Roy, "I hope A Suitable Boy will be most appreciated by people in India,"[27] and it should be remembered that the novel was composed and published at a time of conservatism, when the Right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party was gaining in popularity and power. At first glance, *A Suitable Boy* seems in harmony with the reactionary politics of this environment. The apparent conservatism of the central plotline and Lata's ultimate decision to marry Haresh, a fellow Hindu chosen by her mother, instead of the "dangerous" Muslim, Kabir, is partly readable as a homage to "traditional values." In this world, interreligious, intercaste, and even love marriage

might compromise a woman's *izzat* (honor) and therefore the *izzat* of the community. Bruce King and others have argued,[28] however, that Haresh represents not a fundamentalist vision of an age-old Hindu India but an avatar of progressive Nehruvian politics and postindependence entrepreneurship. In this sense, Seth's novel espouses a measured liberalism, partly because Lata's marriage is predicated on personal choice. We are told that she opts for Haresh not on account of social pressures (her mother deems a match between Lata and Kabir "unspeakable"[29]), but because she privileges the safety of amicable companionship over the perils of passion. That this act is also strictly in accordance with societal and familial strictures is not incidental, enabling conservative critics like B. Krishnaiah, who conducts a "nativist" analysis of the novel, to laud Seth's adherence to Indian tradition.[30] As an extension of the novel's continent liberalism, the romantic relationship between Firoz and Maan is undeniably present, but it is rare and elliptical in its expression.

Firoz's father is a *nawab*, referred to throughout the novel as the "Nawab Sahib" or the "Nawab of Beitar," which has implications for Seth's portrayals of male–male desire. The term "*nawab*" is used to denote any Muslim ruler in India, although the *nawabs* of the princely kingdom of Awadh/Oudh were perhaps the most famous, at least prior to its annexation by the British in 1856. Colonial discourse was apt to exaggerate the relatively permissive *nawabi* culture of Awadh, accusing it of decadence in the form of gluttony, widespread opium addiction, louche harems, and so forth. As Ruth Vanita has argued, nineteenth-century British accounts of this climate were "internalized . . . by educated Indians in the post-1857 period,"[31] and they persist in the popular imagination today. Seth alludes to these associations in various ways in *A Suitable Boy*; for instance, he describes the now dilapidated Barsaat Mahal as "The pleasure palace of the Nawabs of Brahmpur,"[32] as well as claiming that the town was annexed by the British in the 1850s, which is roughly contemporaneous with the annexation of Awadh and its capital, Lucknow. Moreover, he ultimately reveals that the now upright and God-fearing Nawab of Beitar enjoyed a licentious past involving drink, gambling, and prostitution, which led to the birth of his illegitimate daughter, Tasneem Bai. Partly distancing Firoz from this history of the *nawabs*, Seth remarks, "Since Firoz was a lawyer and his brother a doctor, it was not as if they fitted the popular mould of the idle sons of aristocracy,"[33] but he does not refute the connection between his character's feelings for Maan and the popular association of *nawabi* culture with male–male desire. Johan

Pemble and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones[34] have noted the overt presence of "homoeroticism" in Awadh, on which Brahmpur appears to be partly based, and Ravi Bhatt contextualizes the so-called homosexuality of the Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula (1748–1797):

> Whether the Nawab was a homosexual or not, can be debated, but certain other records too indicate that young boys were "used" in the society for paedophilic activities till the end of the Nawabi era, and perhaps even later. For instance, as per a hospital report of February 1850, female prostitutes were often infected with venereal disease, and young boys between twelve and sixteen years were treated for syphilis. The occurrence of these diseases was ascribed to "revolting practices" by the Superintendent Dr Leckie, who observes, "there are Houses in the city, where . . . boys are professedly kept for the above unnatural purpose."[35]

Bhatt's comments echo Vanita's observation that the East India Company's principal strategy for seizing Indian kingdoms was "to declare the heirs illegitimate," which was often enabled by the claim that a monarch was impotent or sexually deviant.[36] Self-interested British accusations of decadence, exemplified by Dr. Leckie's purple account of brothels, resulted in an enduring connection in the Indian popular imagination between *nawabi* culture and male–male desire. This equation has found ample expression in literature, perhaps most famously in Ismat Chughtai's Urdu short story "*Lihaf*" ("The Quilt"), in which the *Nawab* is a lover of slim young boys,[37] and his inclinations are used as the counterpart of Begum Jaan's sexual relationship with her maidservant, Rabbu. Chughtai's exposition of male–male desire, which is immediately legible in a society where such proclivities are silently acknowledged, renders its "unthinkable" female counterpart more decipherable. Significantly, the closest Maan and Firoz come to sexual intimacy is within Beitar Fort, which is represented as an independent enclave of *nawabi* history and culture. Seth's portrayal of the connection between the *nawabs* and male–male desire relies on specific cultural and historical knowledge for its intelligibility, and its syncretic rendition in English removes it further from the legibility of its Urdu origins. Hence the overwhelming majority of reviews by Euro-American readers, compiled on websites like Amazon, overlook this important dimension.

If in these instances Seth uses one interpretation of Islam in India as a metonym for amorous attachments between men, elsewhere in the novel he shrouds this desire by mimetically depicting the historical appropriation of Islamic male–male eroticism by male–female lovers.

Such an appropriation is not interrogated; instead, Seth plays with love and sex between men while simultaneously eliding them according to the syncretic precedents of colonial and postcolonial censorship. This is particularly apparent in his portrayal of the Urdu *ghazal* (itself inseparable from the milieu of Lucknow and Awadh), the homoeroticism of which is introduced early on in a dialogue between Maan and Firoz:

> If you were to go down, a good-looking, elegant fellow like you, you would be surrounded within seconds by eligible young beauties. And ineligible ones too. They'd cling to you like bees to a lotus. Curly locks, curly locks, will you be mine?'
>
> Firoz flushed. "You've got your metaphor slightly wrong," he said. "Men are bees, women lotuses."
>
> Maan quoted a couplet from an Urdu *ghazal* to the effect that the hunter could turn into the hunted, and Imtiaz laughed.[38]

The repetition of "curly locks" emphasizes Firoz's connection to the young boys who inspired many worshipful *ghazals*, although Maan's references incorporate Urdu and Sanskrit literary traditions. Firoz is feminized by his construction as the object rather than the agent of desire, reinforced by the simile of the lotus, a trope used in South Asian Sanskrit writings to evoke beauty, both male and female, physical and metaphysical. By inverting the traditional gender associations of the flower in courtly romance, Maan tacitly figures Firoz as the beloved he must pursue, reiterated by his citation of the role-reversal of "hunter" and "hunted" in the *ghazal*. Yet the reader's attention is distracted from this reinvention by the displacement of Maan's remarks onto the "eligible" young women.

Seth makes more direct reference to male–male desire in the *ghazal* when Maan first encounters Saeeda Bai, a courtesan and entertainer with whom he later falls in love, at a public performance. Firmly rooted in Islamic traditions of the *tawa'ifs*, the sophisticated and accomplished courtesans who flourished in pre-colonial Lucknow,[39] Saeeda Bai is metonymic for a once sensualistic but now declining way of life. In this scene she focuses on a single young man named Hashim in the audience and addresses her performance to him:

> Since much Urdu poetry, like much Persian and Arabic poetry before it, had been addressed by poets to young men, Saeeda Bai found it mischievously easy to find such references to male dress and demeanour as would make it clear whom she was aiming her shafts at.[40]

While Seth does begin to acknowledge that writers of *ghazals* were often lovers of boys, this is not made explicit. He subtly references the heterosexualization of the *ghazal* as an act of appropriation or transformation, without verbalizing the profound irony that its former "homoeroticism" goes unremarked by the assembled company. Instead, as he depicts the pleasurable sexual tension of this scene, he withholds judgment on this implicit process of censoring. Like Firoz, Hashim is construed as a youthful, somewhat effeminate object of desire, but here the reciter is not the male poet but a woman: "Your beauty was that which once bewitched the world –/Even after the first down came on your cheeks it was a wonder."[41] The poet's adoration for the boy in question is suggested by the exaggerated claim that he is still astonishingly beautiful even after the "first down" has appeared; similarly, one of Ghalib's *ghazals* incorporates this common motif of male–male desire: "hairat—e khatat—e rukh—e yār" ("the amazement of the down/writing on the cheek of the beloved").[42] Yet both Saeeda Bai and Seth himself appear to be exploiting the indeterminacy of the *ghazal*, more pronounced in Urdu because of the lack of distinctly gendered object pronouns,[43] in order to reinvent its most physically "homoerotic" lines as a statement of male–female attraction.

Unlike in *The Golden Gate*, where the colonial censor is chimerical and elusive, Seth's elision echoes the colonial dismissal of native degeneracy and effeminacy, as embodied in "indigenous" literary traditions, and the sexually conservative legacy of the Victorians in the field of Urdu literature. Carla Petievich notes that "Critical embarrassment surrounding male homoeroticism in the ghazal coincides with the suppression both of rekhti and of other aspects of Indo-Muslim culture deemed vulnerable by reformists to the accusation of effeminacy emanating from British colonial discourse."[44] Although in *A Suitable Boy* the "imperial official censor" of *The Golden Gate* is only ever insinuated, both suggest that the syncretic elision of male–male desire on some level results from a historicist necessity rather than a personal decision. If the history of the *ghazal* and Seth's allusions to "young boys" might conjure a "degenerate" history of male "homoeroticism," this is forestalled by the invisible reenactment of colonial censorship and the swift restitution of male–female desire. The immanence of the colonial censor here parallels how "homophobic" colonial prejudices were swiftly normalized, propagated, and rebranded as part of an age-old "Indian culture," to the extent that they frequently remain uninterrogated in present-day India.

Yaari

Throughout *A Suitable Boy* Seth emphasizes the friendship between Firoz and Maan, and whenever they are depicted together the author almost invariably combines the possessive noun phrase "his friend" with some form of physical intimacy, epitomized by lines like "He put his arms around his friend's shoulder."[45] Seth's insistence on this easy tactility evokes the Hindi/Urdu concepts of *yaar* and *yaari*,[46] and it is worth noting that in his preface to the Hindi translation of *A Suitable Boy* he claims to have often thought in Hindi when composing the novel. *Shabdkosh* translates "*yaar*" variously as "buddy," "chum," "friend," "mate," "pal," "sweetheart," "crony," and "sport,"[47] and it is used ubiquitously in present-day India to refer to same-sex and cross-sex friends. At the same time, its etymology lends it an illicit character, as the Sanskrit *jaara* initially denoted an adulterous lover. In Urdu poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, *yaar* was used to describe men's and women's male and female beloveds. With no single translation in English, the term blurs the distinction between friend and lover so as to complicate the dyad of Platonic/erotic love foundational to Euro-American epistemology. "*Yaar*" is of particular resonance for men who desire men in India, as Raj Ayyar notes:

> Yaar. There is no English equivalent for this concept, no word that approaches its breadth and depth. Friend is not enough. Buddy is superficial, reeks of Budweiser beers and backslapping in bars. The word that possibly comes closest is camerado, a word used by Whitman meaning "brother-in-arms." In India a world of romantic images revolves around yaari. There are tales of yaars dying for one another. Even his wife must many a time take a backseat to a man's yaar. (The woman's equivalent of yaar is saheli, a concept that is equally rich in meaning.)
>
> Even within a heterosexual context yaar has, and always has had, many homoerotic overtones, embodying values such as loyalty and strong commitment. A yaar is someone to whom one can reveal one's darkest, deepest secrets. Thus one never has more than one or two yaars at one time. It is likely that during their early years a lot of yaars have some sort of sexual connection before settling down to a socially accepted heterosexual life. They most often continue to express their affection openly, however; many a Western gay man has been puzzled by this, not realizing that the affection, for the most part, carries no overtones of sexuality.[48]

That *yaar* and *yaari* are polysemic and shifting categories is clear, but Ayyar's equation of *yaar* with *saheli* is overly celebratory. In a society frequently dismissive of women's sexuality, *saheli* connotes the innocence of amity rather than eroticism, although it can be used in

knowing and resistant ways; in *Manjuben Truck Driver*,[49] for instance, a documentary about a Gujarati woman who is conspicuously masculine and ostensibly desires other women, the eponymous subject refers to a companion who is probably a lover as a *saheli*, but the exact meaning of the word is never clarified.

Yaari is of decisive significance when analyzing Firoz and Maan's ambiguous relationship, which carries a subtext of romantic and sexual intimacy far exceeding the normative present-day conceptualization of the English-language "friendship." At the same time, one must bear in mind the instability of the latter term and its historical overlap with homoeroticism, even if these connotations have been displaced (but not necessarily effaced) in modernity. As Ayyar suggests, then, in the contemporary world *yaari* gives more scope for erotic incertitude, and its attendant romantic feelings and behaviors remain within the realm of the normative as long as they are not proclamatory. In *A Suitable Boy* the term "friend" becomes the syncretic instantiation of these apparently divergent narratives of male–male relationships, facilitating a ceaseless back-and-forth movement between asexual and sexual love. Seth captures this indeterminacy repeatedly, as in the following aporetic exchange between Firoz and Maan:

> "You tell everyone everything," said Firoz, smiling.
>
> "Not everything," said Maan, looking at Firoz.
>
> Firoz colored slightly. "No, I suppose not. Anyway, most things. I'm not a very forthcoming person. I tell you as much as I tell anyone. And if I don't tell you more, it's a good thing. It might be disturbing."
>
> "To me?" said Maan.
>
> "Yes—to you, to me, to us, to Brahmpur, to the universe," said Firoz evasively. "I presume you're going to have a bath after the journey?"[50]

The ambiguity surrounding this sexual/asexual episode yields a number of interpretations: it may be the fruit of an intimate Platonic friendship, or, in the context of other equivocal conversations in the novel, it is readable as an oblique insinuation of romantic and sexual union. Once again, Firoz is implicitly feminized by his blushing upon Maan's reference to their shared secret, and his general "evasiveness" is analogous to the novel's elliptical engagement with male–male desire. Firoz's final allusion to the "bath" may bespeak his physical intimacy with his lover, borne out by the overriding potency of this (potentially) sexual dimension to "disturb" everything, from the individual to the

universe, which could pertain to an initially Euro-American framework of Judeo-Christian condemnations of sodomy and homoeroticism as sinful, as well as psychosexual accounts of the unnaturalness of homosexuality. This descriptive lacuna is duplicated within the framework of *yaari* so that Firoz seems preoccupied not by any intrinsic evil but by the social disturbance which would follow the publicization of love and sex between men. According to this logic, underlying orientations, behaviors, and their ethical dimensions are largely irrelevant; as long as they are silenced, the universe is unperturbed.

This is just one instance of the countless polysemic exchanges between Firoz and Maan that occur for the first 1093 pages of the novel, but both men are romantically linked to women: Maan is infatuated with Saeeda Bai, while Firoz is courting Tasneem Bai, her daughter. Drawing on initially Euro-American narratives of dimorphic sexuality, one might deduce that the men are bisexual, heterosexual but with a past involving "adolescent homosexuality," or simply friends in the typical non- or anti-erotic sense. Yet the syncretic rendition of *yaar* into the English-language *friend* accommodates the back-and-forth movement between male–female relationships and adolescent or adult love and sex between men without the need for terminological adjustment, and without challenging dominant assumptions in India that men will marry and procreate. Latterly, the physicality between Maan and Firoz is heightened:

> There was something in Firoz's voice that reminded Maan of their younger days.
>
> "Firoz!" laughed Maan, turning towards him. "All that is over. We were just kids. Don't tell me you're jealous."
>
> Well, as you once said, I never tell you anything.
>
> "Oh?" said Maan, rolling over on his side towards his friend, and taking him in his arms.
>
> "I thought you were sleepy," said Firoz, smiling to himself in the dark.
>
> "So I am," said Maan. "But so what?"
>
> Firoz began to laugh quietly. "You'll think I've planned all this."
>
> "Well, perhaps you have," said Maan. "But I don't mind," he added with a small sigh as he passed a hand through Firoz's hair.[51]

This description may connote a sexual encounter, but there remains scope for reading Maan and Firoz's physical familiarity as the

expression of passionate friendship, a romantic *yaari*, which stops just short of sex. If sex occurs, it does so in the reader's imagination, and not in Seth's depiction, which avoids transparent signifiers such as kissing or any reference to erogenous zones. Maan can take his friend in his arms without any subsequent change in the terminology of their relationship: even here they are "friends" and not "lovers," and, regardless of the intimacy between them, they will remain mere "friends" and *yaars* for the remainder of the novel.

Whether or not the men have sex, their moments of profound physical intimacy intensify their relationship, so that when Maan later stabs Firoz under the misapprehension that the latter is having an affair with Saeeda Bai, the *crime passionnel* seems partly motivated by his possessiveness of his friend. When Maan discovers the truth, that Firoz was actually in love with Saaeda Bai's daughter, Tasneem, he despairs over the deteriorating health of his friend and loses the will to live himself. Yet the men recover in unison:

> A change too came over Maan with the slow recovery of his friend. It was as if he had come out of the valley of the shadow of his own death. If his own danger had caused Saeeda Bai to realize how much she loved him, the danger Firoz had been in had given him a similar insight.[52]

The Biblical reference to the 23rd Psalm of the Old Testament emphasizes the profundity of Maan's adoration for Firoz, but the numinous associations ensure that their connection is defined in spiritual rather than corporeal terms. While the analogy with Saeeda Bai creates parity between male–female and male–male love, and is perhaps metonymic for carnal desire, Maan's anagnorisis heralds a subsequent focus on friendship and *yaari* which is centered on asexual devotion. Once Maan's relationship with Saeeda Bai and Firoz's own with her daughter, Tasneem, have been removed, potentially leading to a more detailed exploration of the men's "homosexuality," Seth places increasing emphasis on the spirituality of their "friendship." Be that as it may, Lata and Haresh's wedding is followed by an ambiguous consummation for Maan and Firoz as well: "Firoz came up to him and they stood there, silent, for a while. A rose-petal or two floated down from somewhere. Neither bothered to brush it off."[53] Recalling the prior ceremony, in which "One or two children squabbled tearfully over the possession of some rose-petals,"[54] this scene creates a romantic vignette of the men's love. Also contributing to the narrative framing of their devotion, the image appears when the reader is introduced to

Firoz and Maan 1,442 pages earlier and the former brushes a rose petal off the latter's cap.[55] The final covering of rose petals may signify a marriage involving eroticism, or simply a spiritual union between two friends and *yaars*, perhaps reminiscent of the seven steps taken around the sacred fire by same-sex friends in pre-modern South Asia, an ideal that persists in India today.[56] If the shower of rose petals is linked to matrimony, the narrative refuses to expatiate on this symbolism. The scattering is random, it is greeted with apathy—"neither bothered to brush it off"—and it is succeeded by a censoring silence: "Every topic seemed closed for one reason or another."[57] Significantly, Firoz and Maan's relationship immediately recedes to make room for the exposition of Lata's conjugality with Haresh, which is firmly located at the novel's thematic and structural center.

The marginality of Firoz and Maan's encounters in a predominantly picturesque portrayal of India which does not disrupt conservative values underscores the novel's elliptical engagement with male–male desire. Because there is no change in the terminology of friendship throughout, and no overt sexualization or publicization of the relationship, reclassifications like "gay" and "homosexual" do not emerge. The indeterminacy Seth creates seems quite in keeping with histories of the colonial suppression of the *ghazal* and *nawabi* culture, so that, even if Firoz and Maan do have sex, its acceptability lies outside the narrative and public discussion. If *yaar* expresses and generates ambiguity, this is intensified via the process of translation into an *ostensibly* asexual Anglophone nomenclature. Such equivocation is inseparable from the tension between the impetus to speak and to remain silent.

Conclusion

In recent years Seth has embarked on political activism and the promulgation of his bisexuality, most famously after the reinstatement of Section 377 in December 2013. In an article accompanying the front cover of *India Today*, he wrote a trenchant critique of the impulses behind the reintroduction of the law:

> One bludgeons his daughter to death because she loves a boy from the same village. Another seeks to blackmail or send to prison two men because they love each other. Another forcibly separates a woman from her girlfriend and rapes her to teach her the right kind of sex.[58]

Such politicism and candor, also evident in recent poems like "Love's Great Power," should not encourage readers to map Seth's literary "journey" from the closet into the world of pro-gay politics, a developmental position structured by unspoken assumptions about the trajectory of Indian sexuality. This stance is especially untenable given that the elliptical poems of "Mappings" coexist with the declamatory moments of "Dubious," and *Summer Requiem*, published around a year after "Through Love's Great Power," is written almost entirely in the elliptical mode.

In Seth's writing, ellipsis and declamation are neither "Western" nor "Indian," instead emerging from his subjectivity and conscious and unconscious deployment of syncretic cultural forms. Ellipsis may be derived from the "imperial censor," Judeo-Christian rhetoric in Indian contexts, or the overlapping of present-day definitions of friendship and *yaari*. Similarly, the forthright male–male love of "From the Babur-Nama," resituated in "Hindustan" and rendered from overt Chagatai Turkic into equally overt English, conjures multiple histories of love and sex between men in Euro-America and South Asia. Seth's poetry and prose are not the product of a land where, in apparently timeless fashion, "homosexuality is still closeted." On the contrary, they dismantle the fallacious dichotomy of a vocal Western politics of homosexuality versus an elliptical Indian attitude toward male–male desire.

CHAPTER 4

Communal Tensions: Homosexuality in Raj Rao's *The Boyfriend* and Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*

Introduction

> A speechless Yudi welcomed his Milya with open arms. He wasn't at all bitter about the manner in which Milya had dumped him. He was too old for self-respect, and too much in love. Tears flowed down his cheeks. His heart was full of gratitude and joy, so that when his prodigal lover complained about how long he had walked, Yudi sat the boy down and knelt before him to massage his chapped and weary feet.
>
> From the far end of the room, two pairs of eyes watched Yudi risk rebirth as a shit-worm by touching the feet of a Bhanghi. The eyes belonged to Gauri.[1]

In this scene from Raj Rao's novel *The Boyfriend*, Yudi, the well-educated and affluent Brahmin protagonist, is welcoming back his Dalit lover, Milind, after a prolonged separation. There appears to be an inversion of the inequities of power when romantic relationships straddle differences in age, class, and caste, but the tone is not celebratory. Implicit in the hyperbolic description of Yudi's "speechless" reaction of "joy" and "tears" is a critique of his servility, refracted through the eyes of the ostensibly liberal but ultimately conservative Gauri. *The Boyfriend* presents Yudi's Brahminism as one of the ineluctable constituents of identity that coexist and overlap syncretically with his self-consciously Westernized homosexual orientation and preclude its ideal embodiment. In addition to spotlighting the

Brahmin/Dalit divide, Rao polarizes Yudi and Milind by insisting that the former self-identifies as "radically gay," while the latter falls below the radar of Anglophone sexual politics.[2] Even when the two men are united, they are separated by the ideological differences embedded in their class and caste, a leitmotif that contributes to Rao's depiction of Yudi's more general social alienation. Ritwik, the male–male desiring protagonist of Neel Mukherjee's novel *A Life Apart*, also falls victim to the invidiousness of identity categories, and he experiences a social alienation far greater than Yudi's. If both novels explore the endless overlapping of modern formulations of identity and the location of male–male desire within this syncretic nexus, their politics remain distinct. Rao frowns on the impingement of identity markers like class and caste on homosexuality, but Mukherjee adopts a wider critique of all identitarian taxonomies, including those pertaining to love and sex between men. Both writers also invoke historical moments of extreme communalism in India: *A Life Apart* describes the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, and *The Boyfriend* is haunted by the tensions surrounding the Hindu demolition of the Babri Masjid. Discussing each novel in turn, this chapter analyzes how Rao and Mukherjee align certain dimensions of categorization with the violence of religious and political schism, suggesting that an initially Euro-American homosexuality acquires different resonances as it dialogizes with exempla of identity politics from Indian history.

The Boyfriend

A lecturer in English at the University of Pune, Raj Rao wrote his doctoral dissertation at Bombay University on the poems of Nissim Ezekiel. While his poetry is similarly conversational, he is distanced from his mentor by his scatological diction and sexual voyeurism, which Hoshang Merchant describes as "tearing the veils of linguistic gentility."[3] At Pune Rao has inaugurated courses in gay literature and queer studies, but, despite his self-identification as gay, homosexual, or queer, his writing makes clear that he acknowledges the contingency of these terms and is attentive to the numerous alternative identity markers available in India. In *The Boyfriend* and his 2010 novel *Hostel Room 131* he adduces both LGBT movements and nonnormative South Asian sexual and gender identities like those of the *hijra* and *kothi*.

In his introduction to *Whistling in the Dark*, Rao makes explicit his mobilization of the signifier "gay" in the name of activism, which has a correlative in his interest in queer politics. What he calls "the intrinsic quality of resistance built into queerness"[4] echoes the idealism surrounding the term as it was co-opted by queer theory in the Anglo-American academic establishment of the early 1990s. Andrew Grossman notes that Rao is a self-professed "radical utopian"[5]; present in much of his academic and creative writing on queer themes, this stance is particularly salient in the introduction to *Whistling in the Dark*, where he analyzes Foucault's oft-cited remark on the normalization of homosexuality as an identity category:

> The French philosopher Foucault says: "One day the question, 'Are you homosexual?' will be as natural as the question, 'Are you a bachelor?' "
>
> This is a utopian statement, the signifier "one day" pointing to the idealised future. Also, "bachelor," unlike homosexual, is a neutral construct that implies a deferring of judgement, as well as an expression of choice—the choice to stay single.[6]

Rao only provides a partial quotation of Foucault, whose full assertion is as follows:

> The problem is still very current: between the affirmation "I am homosexual" and the refusal to say it, lies a very ambiguous dialectic. It's a necessary affirmation since it is the affirmation of a right, but at the same time it's a cage and a trap. One day the question "Are you a homosexual?" will be as natural as the question "Are you a bachelor?" But, after all, why would one subscribe to this obligation to choose? One can never stabilize oneself in a position; one must define the use that one makes of it according to the moment.[7]

Foucault's stance is not, as Rao suggests, "utopian." He does briefly hint at an idealized future, but his statement regarding the impossibility of stabilizing "oneself in a position" suggests that a linear progression toward a telos of egalitarianism is simply not possible: "homosexual" and "bachelor" can never achieve absolute parity because their usage can never be static. Rao has selectively marshaled Foucault's words not to debunk "utopian statements," but to consolidate his own brand of queer utopianism through careful differentiation. By focusing on the disparity between the terms "bachelor" and "homosexual," instead of Foucault's insistence on their epistemological and ontological instability, he begins to suggest that queerness

is substantive and cannot have equivalence with other denotations of identity.

Hence he argues:

> What does gay identity mean? It means, for one, that though we possess multiple identities and are fragmented subjects, identity based on sexual orientation is not subsumed by previous categories of race, class and gender. If these identities intrude, so that a white gay man foregrounds skin colour in his dealings with a gay Asian or African, or a gay prince like Prince Manvendra, a contemporary Rajput prince from Rajpipla, Gujarat, foregrounds class in his dealings with, say, a gay servant in his father's palace, then perhaps it is time for queerness to secede from the union of identity markers, and establish itself as an autonomous category.[8]

Rao's rhetoric of intrusion recognizes that in practice "gay identity" can be violently and unjustly compromised by other identifications, but he contends that homosexuality must be subsumptive if it is to have any utility. This position is as tenuous in Euro-America as it is in India, where factors such as class, caste, race, religion, language, and birthplace are invoked in the formulation of identity, inevitably overlapping syncretically with and often taking priority over the self-identifications of "gay," "queer," and "homosexual." The incipient call for an autonomous and unalloyed queerness surely betrays a utopianism far greater than that of a Foucault.

The Boyfriend can be read as an extended disquisition on this problem of queerness and the "union of identity markers," and Rao's utopia is nowhere in evidence, except, perhaps, as an idealized alternative to the events of the narrative. The novel describes the life of Yudi, a forty-something self-proclaimed gay man who is emphatically middle-class and atheist, qualities which apparently complement his work as a journalist. Capitalizing on the opportunities presented by male homosocial spaces in 1990s Bombay, he enjoys a promiscuous lifestyle and frequently has sex in public locations. He meets and falls in love with a much younger Dalit man, Milind, with whom he has an idiosyncratic and mutually manipulative relationship. Eventually, Milind's family marry him off to a woman of his own caste, and he severs all contact with Yudi. At the end of the novel, Milind, impoverished in his new marriage, returns to Yudi to reinitiate their affair, unashamedly demanding his "pocket money (arrears plus interest)."[9] Thus the novel emerges as a cynical exposé of the power struggles engendered by the overlapping of a gay or homosexual identity and other identifications in India.

When Yudi first encounters Milind (at this stage going by the false name of Kishore) in Churchgate Station, Rao underscores the vast disparity between them. Yudi is a "prolific freelancer" who is said to earn "at least thirty grand a month"; while he is over forty and "beginning to grey at the temples," Milind is "a guy in his late teens, twenty at most."[10] Their first sexual contact is coextensively divisive:

> He brought his left hand towards the young man's crotch... No sooner was he touched there, than the boy started in fear. How could anyone be so shameless! He gasped silently. Yudi, ignorant of the boy's confusion, drew closer. The odour of sweat from the young working-class body made his head spin, but then he noticed the lad's feet. The fellow was wearing slippers. The feet were as shapeless as a leper's, like the feet of most men who came to Churchgate. The uncut toenails were pallid. There were cracks on the soles, especially visible around the heels. Yuk, Yudi burped. The boy abruptly moved away. [11]

Yudi and Milind's divergent and irreconcilable attitudes are encapsulated in the latter's "silent gasp," a harbinger of the men's consistent inability to express their innermost feelings. Despite the delicate interplay of perspectives here, there is no real connection, impeded as it is by differences in age, class, caste, and sexual identity. Yudi objectifies the "working-class" body in his oscillation between fetishism and repulsion, and a pervasive sense of alienation is wrought by his synecdochic reduction of Milind to disaggregated physical characteristics: "the odour of sweat," "a pair of slippers," and "uncut toenails." Rao subsequently develops the men's physical differences into radical socioeconomic inequalities: Milind insists that Yudi lives in a "posh area" and asks him what language he speaks at home. Yudi replies, "English," "quickly" adding "and Hindi,"[12] in a half-hearted attempt to downplay the privilege associated with the Anglophone classes.

In his article "Englishpur ki Kothi," Alok Gupta explores the potential divisiveness of language among gay men and exponents of "local" nonnormative gender and sexual identities like that of the *kothi*. Describing how he was singled out by a working-class *kothi* because of the assumption that he spoke English, Gupta wryly remarks, "I may also be a homosexual, but I was different. I was a cunning ambassador of the English-speaking people. Not just that, I was from an exclusive, inaccessible-to-all and English-speaking domain called 'Englishpur.'"[13] Drawing attention to the syncretic coexistence, overlapping, and equivalence of gay and *kothi* identities, he also shows how they are inseparable from class and education, as indexed by language.

Hence in *The Boyfriend* Milind cannot understand Yudi when he speaks in "upper-class" English, just as Yudi is unable to follow Milind's "working-class" Marathi.

Before their first sexual encounter, Milind attempts to establish Yudi's religion, hoping that he is not a "Mohammedan" because "They're unclean." The latter remains silent as "he had no desire to educate the boy about the ills of bigotry,"[14] but his assumption that Milind will blackmail him after sex is equally partisan, recalling his antagonistic reactions of attraction and repulsion in Churchgate. Although Yudi seeks these subaltern men out as lovers, his ambivalence is bound up with an ineffaceable sense of class superiority. In Rao's poem "Underground," he reveals the fragility of this complacency. Here the upper middle-class gay man is forced to acknowledge that Bombay is "the mafia world/of nightly blackmailers," where, after making sexual overtures toward another man in the public toilets, he is threatened: "You want to throw loo goo on his face./ But you give in meekly,/ Handing over cash and valuables./ The meek shan't inherit./ You stand bereft,/ The city your headload."[15] The poem creates an atmosphere of rage and helplessness in the face of blackmail, underlined by the scatological impulse to "throw loo goo" at the blackmailer, the hyperbole of "bereft" with its associations of death, and the final metaphor of the "headload," which transforms the upper middle-class gay man into a coolie oppressed by the entire city and its denizens. In contrast with Yudi's contradictory position, the poetic persona advocates a simple link between homosexuality and abjection.

Siddharth, the middle-class protagonist of *Hostel Room 131*, also lives in constant isolation as a result of his obsession with a younger man from the lower classes, but his apartness is fleshed out more coherently than Yudi's, especially in contradistinction to the collectives of *kothis* and *hijras* whom he periodically encounters. As he bitterly remarks, "Here are deviants who see the sense of hanging around together, although devoid of education. We, of the middle classes, on the other hand, learned and all, myopically remain islands unto ourselves."[16] Dialogizing with that of the close-knit group he is observing, Siddharth's gay identity loses its connotations of separatist communities and activism and is instilled with the isolationism of individuals. This is not Rao's utopia where homosexuality can form collectives based on social ostracism, because "education" has created multiple allegiances which superannuate a singular identity of sexual or gender nonnormativity.

In *The Boyfriend* Rao hints at the possibility of an ideal homosexual community, only to disavow it and therefore reinforce the inescapability of other identity formations. This is evident in his description of Yudi and Milind's first penetrative sex:

> Whenever Yudi picked up strangers and took them home, he gladly offered them the active role in bed. He had a theory based on years of experience. As long as men were allowed to penetrate, there was no fear of their returning afterwards to demand money or to beat you up. Some even thought it beneath their dignity to accept cash from someone they had buggered. For such a person, according to them, was at best a hijra. And their heroism and sense of valour did not permit them to assault a eunuch. It was only when these men were penetrated that they became wounded tigers. They felt emasculated. They could then even murder. Currency notes, wristwatches, walkmans, sneakers, were not compensation enough; these couldn't restore their lost masculinity. They accepted the presents with one hand and put a knife in your back with the other.[17]

Rao suggests that male–male sex acts can produce their own nexus of identity markers which may be empowering or disabling. Gayatri Reddy aptly identifies that the terms "homosexual" and "gay," although historically constructed in different ways, do not in themselves specify receptive/penetrative sexual roles, unlike many other identities in India such as those of the *panthi*, *kothi*, and *hijra*.[18] For the working-class men whom Yudi seduces, the binary opposition of penetrator/penetratee is inseparable from that of man/*hijra*, implying that they do not conceive of a "versatile" and "egalitarian" homosexuality uninflected by Indian accounts of gender normativity. Yudi's gay identity, despite its apparent aloofness from these low-class and caste conceptualizations, is not impervious to them, and the novel depicts the slippage between knowingly playing the role of the "feminine" *hijra* in sexual intercourse and adopting "womanly" characteristics, as refracted by masculinist paradigms, in a male–male relationship.

Receptive anal sex is stigmatized by many of the characters in *The Boyfriend* and *Hostel Room 131*, and it is significant that the term *gandu*, "one who has his anus taken," is still a prevalent insult in Northern India. Proffering a cogent explication for such phenomena, Indrani Chatterjee traces a genealogy of the active/passive binary along the axis of slavery, arguing that historically in South Asia a ruler or social superior could penetrate an inferior, while the inversion of this unwritten

law invited derision and punishment.[19] In this description of Yudi's first anal sex with Milind, while portraying identitarian preconceptions as deterministic, Rao simultaneously refuses to replicate the historical connection between wealth- and class-based privilege and sexual roles. Having repeatedly emphasized Yudi's financial and class sovereignty over Milind, he inverts the dyads of master/slave and active/passive by making the younger man penetrate the older. It is suggested that the sex act itself holds sway over all money-, class-, and caste-based authority, and a litany of presents, "currency notes, wristwatches, walkmans, sneakers," is insufficient to placate the metaphorical "wounded tiger," however poor and abject he may be. Rao toys with two idealistic positions here. Firstly, the inversion of Yudi and Milind's social status implies that penetrative anal sex can level class differences; secondly, this sex act seems to be outside the usual economies of gifts and bribery. But even as this idealistic stance is insinuated, Yudi and Milind's positioning could be subject to a radically different interpretation: this new inverted order is based on the avoidance of blackmail and violence and a refusal of the working-class man to accede to Rao's idealized notion of homosexuality. Such men, he contentiously suggests elsewhere, are merely MSMs, whose "implicit sense of denial" requires "counselling."[20] In *The Boyfriend* he ultimately repudiates the possibility that male–male penetrative sex can democratize power relations in the outside world, merely reinvesting these hierarchies with alternative models of exploitation and pathology.

Rao adopts a comparable strategy of inversion regarding Milind's Dalit and Yudi's Brahmin status; when Milind warns him that he is an untouchable, Yudi responds:

> "May I kiss you on the mouth?" . . . It was his way of demonstrating that he cared two fucks if Milind was a Brahman or a Bhangi, whose ancestors cleaned the shit of others . . .
>
> The more down-and-out Milind was, the more they would click. Outcastes, after all, can only expect to be friends with outcastes.[21]

Yudi's playful alliteration of "Brahman" and "Bhangi" appears to break down the gulf between the two, a gesture reinforced by his exaggerated vision of his own abjection as an "outcaste." We recall Rao's insistence on the parity of the homosexual and the coolie/peon in "Underground," but Yudi's choice to live as openly gay is not analogous to the determinism of Milind's caste inheritance. In both cases

their so-called camaraderie is dictated by the upper middle-class man, and degrees of marginalization go unacknowledged; an untouchable who visibly loves and has sex with men undoubtedly has less social currency than his Brahmin counterpart.

Rao does not allow Yudi's idealistic vision to go unchecked, instead revealing it as illogical and contradictory. To ascertain whether or not Yudi is really troubled by his caste, Milind exhorts him to eat several wafers that he has half-consumed, and Yudi reacts furiously:

> "Homos are no different from Bhangis. Both are Untouchables. So why should I have a problem with eating your jootha?"
>
> "But you are a Brahman, aren't you?"
>
> "No, I am a homosexual. Gay by caste. Gay by religion."
>
> "I don't understand what you are saying."
>
> "What I am saying is that homosexuals have no caste or religion. They have only their homosexuality."
>
> "How can that be?"
>
> "That's how it is. Straight people are Brahmans, gays Shudras. So you see, both you and I are Shudras. That's why we are best friends."
>
> At some intuitive level, Milind suspected that Yudi was talking sense. He was in no position, however, to understand the intricacies of the argument.[22]

Yudi's claim to have "only [his] homosexuality" paraphrases Rao's idealism: "It is time for queerness to secede from the union of identity markers, and establish itself as an autonomous category." Distancing an ontology of homosexuality from caste and religion, Yudi is suggesting that it cannot have parity with other constituents of identity. This idealistic position again seems unrealizable, however, as it is impossible for Yudi and Milind to conceive of placing homosexuality outside the corral of other identity markers like class and caste. Yudi is only able to explicate his beliefs using an analogy that locates homosexuality and caste within the same ontological schema and thus the same matrix of power: "Straight people are Brahmans, gays Shudras." Milind's confusion points to the more general impossibility of Yudi's queer utopia, because to dislocate queerness from identity and establish it as a new category is paradoxical, as categorization and identification are inseparable. Yudi's insistence that the two men are Shudras together is itself

inextricably linked to disequilibria of power; he claims an equivalence with homosexuality but betrays his ignorance and indifference by using "Bhangi," "Untouchable," and "Shudra" interchangeably, when the three terms have radically different significations.[23] Never having experienced the privations and degradation of the lowest castes, he never displays any real understanding of their existence, and his intellectualization of the problem is, for Milind, too recondite to fulfill its ostensibly explanatory purpose.

However much he protests, Yudi cannot escape what Mulk Raj Anand in his 1935 novel *Untouchable* calls "six thousand years of racial and class superiority"[24]: the homosexual relationship can never be disentangled from the complex networks of class, caste, religion, and other expressions and determinants of power. Observing the gigantic statue of the Jain saint Gomateshwara in the city of Shravanabelagola, Yudi is about to make an inflammatory remark on the size of its genitals, and the two men quarrel again:

> "Shut up!" Milind snapped. "Have some respect for a sacred place. You're so educated, yet you talk such rubbish!"
>
> "Let me put it this way," said Yudi, not accustomed to being snubbed. "I talk rubbish because I'm educated. At least I have something to say. You illiterates are slaves. You only say what people allow you to!"[25]

Confounding Milind's lack of education with his menial status, Yudi reveals his earlier affirmation of their shared untouchability to be hollow. Rao is intimating that gay idealism as espoused by a Yudi is at best contradictory, at worst hypocritical, because homosexuality is continually eclipsed by his attachment to the other markers of identity that inform his social subjectivity. *The Boyfriend* painstakingly demonstrates that Yudi and Milind are separated by class, caste, age, language, education, and religion, and, in a society where such formulations of identity frequently militate against fulfilling relationships, "even" gay idealism cannot emerge untainted by social conditioning. Rao's position recalls that of Dennis Altman, who claims of the "developing world":

> The romantic myth of homosexual identity cutting across class, race, and so on doesn't work in practice any more than it does in the West. The experience of sexuality in everyday life is shaped by such variables as the gap between city and country; ethnic and religious differences; and hierarchies of health, education, and age. The idea of a gay or lesbian/gay community

> assumes that such differences can be subordinated to an overarching sense of sexual identity, a myth that is barely sustainable in comparatively rich and affluent societies.[26]

Altman introduces this caveat as part of a list of the challenges that "a discussion of new or modern homosexualities"[27] will have to face. Here and elsewhere in his work, modernization and the internationalization of gay identity are strangely synonymous. Yet he does usefully highlight the syncretic overlapping of an initially Euro-American homosexuality with other identifications in countries like India. Perhaps most importantly, he notes that the concept of a transcendental gay or lesbian identity is just as untenable in Euro-America as in other regions. Altman does not simply celebrate the globalization of gayness, whereas Rao, as I have argued, idealizes its potential for creating collectives of men united by the experience of an essential orientation in the face of widespread discrimination. At the same time, in *The Boyfriend* he recognizes it as a "romantic myth"; this idealism is not untenable, but it is abstracted from the often violent processes of subject formation in 1990s Bombay.

If the principal mode of *The Boyfriend* is critique, this is intensified by Rao's descriptions of communal anxieties and clashes, including those engendered by the Dalit Ambedkarites[28] as they march to Chaitya Bhoomi, where B. R. Ambedkar's last rites were performed. Rao's reference to the Hindu demolition of the Babri Masjid and the nationwide riots that followed epitomizes his critique of inflammatory identity politics. The description of how Yudi and Milind are affected by the riots is brief, but this moment of sectarian strife haunts the novel, just as the demolition of the Masjid has plagued the national imagination for almost two decades. The Babri Masjid was constructed by the Mughal emperor Babur in 1527 in Ayodhya, on the exact spot that many Hindus consider to be the birthplace of Lord Rama, avatar of Vishnu and hero of the *Ramayana*. According to some Hindus, the Masjid was built after Mir Baqi, Babur's general and the viceroy of the region, had destroyed a pre-existing Hindu temple on the site. The majority of Muslims, however, dispute the legitimacy of the Hindu account. On December 6, 1992, after a century and a half of communal tensions surrounding the Masjid, and extensive campaigning between 1989 and 1992 by the BJP, a group of Hindu *karsevaks* (volunteers) stormed the building and reduced it to rubble. The aftermath included several months of intercommunal

Hindu-Muslim rioting across the country, during which time at least 2,000 people lost their lives. The destruction of the Babri Masjid represented a day, in the words of Ram Puniyani, when "most of the people who believed in the values emerging from India's freedom struggle—the values of democracy and secularism—hung their heads in shame. It was a day when many people in this group felt that it marked a major onslaught on the principles enshrined in the Indian constitution."[29]

Rao depicts this event with characteristic sardonicism:

> In the eight months since Yudi and Kishore met, Bombay was ravaged by fierce religious riots. In December 1992, Hindu mobs demolished the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, Lord Ram's birthplace. Then they slaughtered angry Muslims who dared to rise up and give the fanatics a tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye. What they were saying was that if Muslims wanted to live in India and not be bundled off to Pakistan in another infamous train, they would have to put up with every kind of humiliation, including the razing of mosques. They had lost the right to ask questions the day they had converted to the "conqueror's" faith. What was puzzling, however, was that Bombay bore the brunt of what had gone wrong in Ayodhya, a city with which it has as little in common as pizzas have with pooris.[30]

The interlocking identity categories of the present are doubly immovable because they are burdened by the weight of the past. The tone is litotic, but Rao appears to sympathize with the suffering Muslims, depicting ironically in free indirect speech the Hindu outrage that they "dared to rise up," despite their putative illegitimacy, after the destruction of the Babri Masjid. He continues to use free indirect speech to represent the Right-wing Hindus' approval of the massacre of Muslims surrounding Partition in 1947, as well as their portrayal of Indian Islam as the result of a series of alien Mughal invasions, in opposition to the implied autochthonous legitimacy of Hinduism. Equally schismatic is the analogy of "pizzas" and "pooris," which clearly signifies Bombay's "liberal cosmopolitanism" and Ayodhya's centralization of "Indian tradition." Within the nation they seem diametrically opposed, but their convergence in times of Hindu nationalism and communalism implies that the relationship is not so simple, that Bombay's liberalism is inevitably tempered and encroached on by reactionary politics.

When Yudi is searching for Milind after the riots, he concludes that "it was unlikely that Kishore would be alive,"[31] and it latterly emerges

in Milind's account that he, although neither Hindu nor Muslim, is embroiled in the brutality of communalism. As he is walking along the railway tracks, he becomes part of a group of Muslims who are fleeing Hindu persecution, and it is only his decision to hide under an empty train that prevents him from being "slaughtered . . . as goats are slaughtered at Deonar."[32] Milind becomes a target simply because he seems to be part of the group, revealing the ultimate indiscriminacy of what began as persecution based on conflicting religious ideology. Yet these experiences do not transform his perceptions: "Of course I am unhappy. The Muslims are our friends, even though they are dirty and I wouldn't really spend time with them. I hate the Brahmans and the Marathas, the VHP and the RSS."[33] Rao satirizes the contradictoriness of Milind's opinions, but he also intimates the disjunction between tolerance and acceptance: national aspirations of mutual tolerance, rooted in Nehru's ideal of the democratic secular nation-state, do nothing to neutralize communal tensions; in fact, they are barely capable of concealing them.

Rao's purpose in evoking this communalism is to adumbrate the failure of the egalitarian ideals enshrined in the national constitution and the principles of democracy, which parallels the vitiation of the democratizing potential of homosexuality by more pressing identifications. As Milind subsequently remarks, "When I was thirteen, I was in the RSS . . . The gandus enrolled me in their party, even though they knew I was a Dalit."[34] To reiterate, the pejorative label *gandu* suggests both a general insult and a specific reference to the passive partner in male–male sexual intercourse, nuances that the Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal captures in his famous Marathi poem "Gandu Bagicha," rendered in English by Hoshang Merchant and the author as "Arsefucker's Park." The ending is relevant here:

> The widow gladdens her heart
> The cripples play kabbadi
> The lame sleep under rags
> The leper cracks what's left of his knuckles
> Homosexuals screw each other
> to the strains of the nation's anthem[35]

The literal and metaphorical dimensions of *gandu* are conflated in the park: while it is full of "arse-fucking" homosexuals, this bleak expanse and its subaltern denizens, including but not limited to Dalits,

are also irretrievably "inferior" and beyond the pale of respectable nationhood. By mapping the use of *gandu* as a means of literal and metaphorical othering, Dhasal shows how Milind can reject the Right-wing Hindu nationalist as simultaneously sexually passive and inferior. Milind's words echo how communalists in India often invoke the putative effeminacy and degenerate sexuality of their opponents; for instance, Muslims in some iterations of Hindu nationalist discourse are figured as the licentious alien, whose overweening sexuality or homosexuality is a threat to society, as Paola Baccheta has persuasively shown.[36] Rao syncretizes communal prejudice with an intolerance of homosexuality, also demonstrating how the metaphorical application of *gandu* in different social contexts necessarily inflects its literal usage, problematizing the secession of gay identity "from the union of identity markers." *The Boyfriend* takes a diachronic approach to epochal moments in Indian history and their syncretic overlapping with contemporary homosexual subjectivity and existence, but ambivalence remains. On the one hand, Rao aligns love and sex between men with wider national debates on tolerance and the dissolution of identitarian violence, implying a central legitimacy for homosexuality as part of a secular, democratic, pan-Indian ideal, and asserting the importance of critique to the ongoing project of nation-building. On the other hand, his attitude toward the possibility of eradicating these communal tensions is pessimistic, perhaps verging on defeatism.

The analogy with Yudi is striking: surrounded by multiple identifications, some of which he internalizes, he cannot perform Rao's ideal homosexuality, and in *The Boyfriend* it never manages to "establish itself as an autonomous category." If the novel hints at the dissolution of hierarchies by means of the shared abjection of homosexuals, Rao maps the inevitable failure of this gesture in order to underscore the ineluctability of other constituents of identity in India. He implies that the gay man's efforts to evade the incursions of identity markers like class, caste, and religion do not result in new collectives but merely a dangerous solipsism and alienation from the world around him. Hence Yudi's simultaneous attraction and aversion to subaltern men is entirely motivated by an irreducible sense of class difference. Even long-term relationships do not promise solidarity because these men do not share his conception of male-male love and sex as constitutive of an essential orientation or identitarian core. Rao's idealistic vision is still far from fruition, but it haunts the narrative as the unrealized and perhaps unrealizable inverse of *The Boyfriend*.

A Life Apart

Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart* is more pessimistic than *The Boyfriend* about the deleterious effects of identity categories on the individual. Set in the 1990s, the novel tells the story of a young man named Ritwik, who, upon the death of his mother in Calcutta, travels to England on a scholarship in order to study at Oxford. After graduation he desires to stay in the country but cannot do so officially, instead joining the subaltern ranks of Eastern European migrant workers and eventually practicing homosexual prostitution in King's Cross. Ritwik meets Zafar, an older Arab man who becomes his lover, and with whom he has an unsatisfactory relationship. At the end of the novel Ritwik returns to King's Cross and is stabbed because of his race. As an analogue to Ritwik's own story, Mukherjee weaves that of an Englishwoman living in Bengal at the time of the Swadeshi[37] movement into the narrative. Mukherjee has remarked on more than one occasion that *A Life Apart* contains elements of autobiography: like Ritwik, he claims to have left behind a strict family in Calcutta to study at Oxford, subsequently completing a PhD in English at Cambridge and moving to London, where he currently lives.

This summary has avoided seeing Ritwik's sexual practices—he only has sex with other men throughout the novel—as part of a gay work or "coming-out" narrative, which would contradict Mukherjee's own perspective. In a 2009 interview, Aditya Sudarshan asked him to respond to such readings:

> You chose a gay protagonist for the novel, and yet the fact of his homosexuality didn't seem to me central to any of his predicaments. He might have been heterosexual and had just the same crises—only the details would differ. Do you agree with this reading? Or do you think the novel has something specific to say about Ritwik's sexuality?
>
> It's really wonderful and affirming to hear this. I cannot tell you how much I agree with this reading. Ritwik's homosexuality is a sideshow. The novel is not a "gay novel" in the sense The Swimming-Pool Library or The Spell are. I'm dismayed to hear it described as a "coming-out" novel or, worse, a "coming-of-age" novel. It could then, with equal justification, be called a novel about fruit-picking, or a novel about a posh London hotel. I was once told by a reader, who was disappointed, I think, that the book was not "about" homosexuality, that I "didn't do anything with Ritwik's homosexuality, just placed it in the novel without dealing with it." What's there to deal with? His sexuality is what it is, a given, and I was not

> interested in mounting an enquiry into it at all. It's a novel "about" other things.[38]

Mukherjee's reply indicates his frustration with the signifiers and processes of categorization, and even the assertion that the novel is "'about' other things" is delivered ironically. This stance may seem ingenuous, as the bestowal of identity is not merely a hermeneutical reaction, instead contributing to contemporary marketing strategies, but Mukherjee's idealism is not so easily dismissed. He is suggesting that identity's many constituents, including homosexuality, should not be heedlessly pigeonholed or hierarchized. Diverging from Rao's privileging of homosexuality, *A Life Apart* implies the necessity of dissolving "identity markers" altogether.

Ritwik's continual need to escape distinguishes him from those characters in migrant literature and film whose nostalgia for lost origins reflects and constitutes passionate national identifications. This representational tendency is exemplified by the homesickness of many of the characters in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* or that of Hussein in Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*,[39] who juxtapose their debased reality in present-day Britain with the hyperreal idealization of their respective homelands of Bangladesh and Pakistan. Yet Ritwik is more perpetual fugitive than self-styled exile, escaping from the concrete origins of a life in Calcutta with a violent and abusive mother and from the categories that are inexorably attached to him. When he meets fellow student Robert in the lunch queue at his Oxford college, the latter attempts to describe India: "It's so exotic, isn't it? And wild, do you know what I mean? And all that mysticism and stuff, it's spiritual, like, isn't it?."[40] As each interrogative is cut short by its successor, no response is expected or required, indicating Ritwik's impotence in the face of this manufactured identity. Robert's vision of India conjures a lengthy history of the European fetishism of the East, reliant as it is on the Orient as a space of ineffability, what Edward Said calls "a place of romantic, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."[41] His conversational remarks also have a clear literary genealogy, recalling the drug-fueled impossibilities of Thomas de Quincey's *Memoirs of an English Opium Eater* or Adela Quested's "unspeakable" attempted "rape" in the equally "unspeakable" Marabar Caves. Despite Ritwik's position as a seemingly empowered interlocutor, in contrast with his silenced forebears in much colonial literature, his objection to such taxonomies is almost never voiced.

More broadly, *A Life Apart* suggests that Orientalism is far from dead; instead, it continues to obstruct the Quixotic project of egalitarian multiculturalism.

Ritwik's own approach to categorization is quite different:

> But then, he thinks, there are two types of people. The first, his type, is the myopic, narrow sort: they take people exactly as they come—curly hair, glasses, crushed velvet trousers from a Marie Curie shop, plays the clarinet, hasn't heard of Alain Resnais, etc etc. No more, no less. There is no other meaning behind these appearances and facts. They mean to him: curly hair, glasses, crushed velvet trousers from a Marie Curie shop, plays the clarinet, hasn't heard of Alain Resnais, etc etc.
>
> The second type, to which Gavin belongs, is endowed with a shrewd socio-historical perceptiveness. They meet people and extrapolate a whole complex context from their parents' marital status, parents' jobs, area of residence, school attended, etc etc. By themselves these indices are nothing but indices to further extrapolation. So Gavin tells him how Highgate and Mitcham lead to further, different meanings. By itself Highgate, or Mitcham, signifies nothing. It's like a game in which corridors open to further niches and passages that then lead to rooms. Or might not. Perhaps one day he is going to understand England and its people enough to have that breadth of vision. He certainly means to.[42]

It is difficult to determine how sincerely Ritwik covets the ability to classify individuals according to their socioeconomic status, but the simile of the game trivializes Gavin's extrapolation. Within the context of the novel and Mukherjee's own stance toward the damage wrought by categorization, Ritwik's own emphatic negation, "There is no other meaning behind these appearances and facts," is not "myopic," instead foreshadowing the "further, different meanings" used to define *A Life Apart*. The irony-laden phrase "breadth of vision" comes to signify Gavin's short-sightedness, which combines superficial Marxism with socioeconomic snobbery, framed within a narrow geographical purview. Ritwik's reluctance or inability to extrapolate does not stem from his sense of foreignness in England, as he does not make these identitarian assumptions in India, nor does he superimpose Indian taxonomies onto his English surroundings. The mute objection, then, is to the general principle of the classificatory impulse.

When Ritwik's mother's violent behavior is, in England, dubbed "child abuse," "He feels a sudden rush of irritation for this business of other cultures, other countries, renaming and recategorising things, using their own yardsticks, for other people, as if their definitions

were universal."[43] At first glance, this universalism is that of post-Enlightenment Euro-America and its engagements with the "Orient," but Ritwik's liminal subjecthood and national affiliations challenge unilateral theories of objectification. The deliberate indeterminacy here implies that a European can be "an other" for an Indian just as easily as an Indian can be "an other" for a European, or, in the words of Hoshang Merchant, "the diasporic market place makes a Jew an other in Ramallah and an Arab an other in Tel-Aviv."[44] *Prima facie*, comparable physical and imaginary encounters occur globally, and have done so for thousands of years, as Edward Said argues in his 1994 afterword to *Orientalism*: "The construction of identity . . . involves the construction of opposites and 'others' . . . Each age and society re-creates its 'Others'."[45] Ritwik's reaction to the term "child abuse" is far stronger than his light satire of Gavin's socioeconomic extrapolation, but his swift generalization of the individual instance implies his larger aversion to reinventing the "other" as a Foucaultian "object of knowledge." As Foucault argues and Ritwik's discursive reconstitution as a victim implies, such transformations are inextricably linked to the exercise and consolidation of power.[46]

Ritwik does not self-identify as homosexual, placing him at odds with the "radically gay"[47] Yudi. *A Life Apart* documents a succession of sexual practices between men, but they rarely coalesce into an identity. This elusiveness is evident in the depiction of the St. Giles toilets where Ritwik goes cottaging:

> There are the beginnings of a fraternity here among some of the regulars, of whom Ritwik has become one. He smiles at some of them, or nods and acknowledges their presence and some are glad of this small social gesture. It's not solidarity or anything, just a flickering registration of the commonality that brings them together underground. They don't know each other's names, where they live, or indeed, where they disappear once they reach the upper world. They only exist for each other in this striplit netherworld.[48]

Whereas the toilets at Churchgate Station in Bombay are replete with judgments and behaviors according to markers of identity like class and caste, "this striplit netherworld" is momentarily denuded of such categories. Far from exemplifying Rao's idealistic vision of a homosexuality detached from other facets of identity, here identity ceases to have meaning. Homosexuality is redundant because it has nothing to assert itself against: this ephemeral "commonality" is not queer camaraderie but the men's shared desire for sexual release.

Relevant here is Jack Halberstam's persuasive analysis of the gender-based function of "rest rooms":

> Whereas men's rest rooms tend to operate as a highly charged sexual space in which sexual interactions are both encouraged and punished, women's rest rooms tend to operate as an arena for the enforcement of gender conformity . . . The codes that dominate within the women's bathroom are primarily gender codes; in the men's room, they are sexual codes.[49]

Although men's toilets can also attract and produce identity formations (e.g., age, class, and hyper-masculinity), they tend to be eclipsed by the suggestion and realization of "sexual interactions." Mukherjee's description parallels Halberstam's, with the "sexual codes" of the St. Giles toilets occluding many of the typologies of the external world. Those who frequent the toilets are "regulars," a temporal and provisional term that reduces them to intermittent sexual presences. This glimpse of the dissolution of identity is fleeting, and Ritwik soon discovers that he is exoticized because of his race, but the contingency of classification is implied by its incompleteness and subordination to sex in this locale. It is only when the men leave and their tacit pact of silence is broken that fully fledged identities are bestowed on them once more.

As Mukherjee suggests, the term "coming-out novel," with its connotations of volition and proclamation, does not adequately reflect Ritwik's unexpected and understated "outing" by his friend Sarah:

> "Oh, Ritwik, why are all the nice, caring, sensitive and good-looking men gay?" she cries out . . .
>
> Ah, you see, it's what you can't have, he says. "Why do you think nearly all gay men fancy straight boys?" There, he has done it.[50]

Ritwik does not instigate the conversation, instead acquiescing to Sarah's overtures of intimacy by echoing her usage of "gay" and only applying it to himself indirectly. If his lexical and tonal mimicry disallows reading this moment as one of meaningful self-identification, it is implied that camaraderie is only attainable via a consensus on typology; Ritwik's inability to inhabit a gay or queer community is underscored by his nonconformity with the conventional tropes of secrecy and disclosure in "coming out" narratives.

Although Mukherjee's protagonist differs markedly from Rao's in the extent of his claim to a gay identity, both are involved in exploitative relationships premised on fear and secrecy. Unlike Yudi's liaison with Milind, Ritwik's encounters with Zafar do not invert the hierarchies of age, money, and social status: it is the older and wealthier man who has complete dominance over him. Zafar first arrives at King's Cross, the demesne of subaltern prostitutes, in a car that is "ludicrously classy"[51]; he is staying in the Dorchester Hotel in Park Lane, while Ritwik is living in Brixton. On their arrival at the Dorchester, Ritwik protests, "I'm not dressed for . . . for such a place," but Zafar is "supremely confident"[52] about the situation, and in sex he is thoroughly selfish, remaining "resolutely locked in his own, limited needs."[53] Ritwik's return to King's Cross after his first encounter with Zafar is almost punished with whipping, and his potentially violent lover refuses to divulge his occupation, possibly as an international arms dealer. It is curious that, having painstakingly rejected and dismantled reductive classification throughout the novel, Mukherjee resorts to popular stereotypes when characterizing this egotistical, controlling, unscrupulous Arab male. But Zafar becomes the apotheosis of the manipulation of identity markers—age, wealth, social status, and sexuality—in order to consolidate his position of control, and thus he is central to the novel's project of critique.

Like *The Boyfriend*, *A Life Apart* is concerned with larger moments of religious and political schism in India. While the former novel shows the immediate physical effects on the protagonists of events like the demolition of the Babri Masjid, *A Life Apart* alternates chapters recounting Ritwik's experiences in the narrative present with those of the Englishwoman Miss Gilby and her exposure to the Swadeshi movement in Bengal at the beginning of the twentieth century. Mukherjee includes several metafictional passages in the main narrative where Ritwik pauses to write Miss Gilby's history, which is obliquely analogous to his own. Before proceeding, the partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi movement require explanation. In July 1905, Lord Curzon, then Viceroy of India, announced the decision to split Bengal into two administrative regions: East Bengal, whose new capital would be Dacca, and West Bengal, whose capital would be Calcutta. The ostensible reason for this was to facilitate efficient governance of the region. Although partition was welcomed by the Muslims, the Hindus felt this was yet another example of Britain's use of "divide-and-rule" policies to undermine "native" resistance to the British Empire. In the words of

Sumit Sarkar, upon whose "magisterial account"[54] Mukherjee's depictions of Swadeshi are based, "The proposed division would create a Muslim majority area out of the eastern part of the province, thus separating the population along religious lines. The very heart of British India's anti-colonialism would be sundered."[55] As a means of protesting partition, the Bengalis developed the strategy of Swadeshi. In *A Life Apart*, Mukherjee glosses this movement through Miss Gilby's reading of the periodical *Dawn*:

> She learns of self-help, boycott of British goods, increasing reliance on home-produced things, all of which constitute swadeshi. She uses her burgeoning knowledge of Bengali to translate it as "of one's own country," "native," "indigenous." She even knows its antonym: bideshi, foreign. She reads Bholanath Chandra's rallying cry to dethrone "King Cotton of Manchester": "It would be no crime for us to take the only but most effectual weapon of moral hostility, left us in our last extremity. Let us make use of this potent weapon by resolving to non-consume the goods of England."[56]

The definition is clearly based on Sarkar's, whose emphasis on the elitism of the Swadeshi movement is echoed in the comment that *Dawn* is full of "the long names of Bengali intellectuals,"[57] among which the voices of the lower classes are nowhere in evidence. Mukherjee's account, like Sarkar's, represents the ultimate failure of the Swadeshi movement to overcome communal differences, and Mr Roy Chaudhury, Miss Gilby's employer, notes that because of the political supremacy of the Hindus in Bengal "the Muslims think Swadeshi is another conspiracy"[58] to prevent them from selling foreign goods and earning a living.

Mukherjee portrays the violence of the 1907 Hindu-Muslim riots by means of sectarian strife in the village of Nawabgunj: "Fires have started in the village of Nawabgunj. Little armies of saffron-clad youths, some of them hardly out of their teens, are rushing around the village like lawless winds, seizing foreign goods wherever they are stocked . . . dragging them out into the open, pouring kerosene over them and torching them into bonfires."[59] If the powerful simile of "lawless winds" evokes the transformation of ideology into a primal and unintellectual violence, the inexorable momentum is reinforced by the surfeit of progressives in this unwieldy sentence. The idealism of Swadeshi is entirely supplanted by terrorism when Miss Gilby is attacked by four Hindu men, two of whom were formerly friendly

toward her. Prior to being assailed, she thinks: "If only she can talk to the two familiar men, everything will be all right."[60] Recalling Rao's description of the communal riots in Mumbai, Mukherjee is suggesting that even the smallest grouping arouses a herd instinct that militates against individual discernment and compassion. More broadly, this scene demonstrates the homogenizing impulses underlying communalism, and it is worth noting that the account of Miss Gilby, governess to Mr Roy Chaudhury's wife, Bimala, is based on Rabindranath Tagore's 1915 novel *The Home and the World* and its reincarnation as a film by Satyajit Ray in 1984.[61] Tagore himself, having initially advocated the Swadeshi movement, later became disillusioned with the acts of "terrorism" and communal violence that it provoked. His novel opposes the enlightened modernism of the *bhadralok* (a member of the Bengali landed classes), Nikhil, to the revolutionary terrorism of his protégé, Sandip. Bimala, Nikhil's wife, is caught between the two men, seduced by Sandip's fervent nationalism and his claims that she is an incarnation of Bharat Mata (Mother India).

Mukherjee's version is partly faithful to Tagore's depiction, but he also draws inspiration from some of Satyajit Ray's changes in the film. Firstly, *A Life Apart* centralizes Miss Gilby's narrative, building on Ray's expansion of her role from the mere handful of lines she occupies in Tagore's novel. Secondly, Mukherjee portrays the relationship between Sandip and Bimala as unequivocally sexual, although in Tagore's work this sexual dimension is only hinted at, and in Ray's film their physical intimacy consists of kissing. These two changes are important: Miss Gilby, an Englishwoman in India, becomes a loose analogue for Ritwik in Britain, as both are singled out because of their difference. By focusing on the seduction of Bimala by Sandip, Mukherjee insists on the base motives beneath much of the post-partition terrorist movement, regardless of its lofty ideals and rhetoric, and the extramarital affair is proffered as an example of nonnormative sexuality which mirrors Ritwik's own. Like Tagore, Mukherjee portrays the Swadeshi movement as ultimately dogged by both the failure of idealism and divisiveness along the lines of race, religion, caste, and class. The Miss Gilby sections and their context do not dovetail neatly with Ritwik's narrative; instead, the correspondence is primarily experiential. For instance, Miss Gilby rarely emphasizes her status as an Englishwoman in India, but it is continually used against her, resulting in her departure from Nawabgunj and

self-imposed exile in the Garhwal Himalayas. We do not encounter a vision of Ritwik's identitarian syncretism as a "gay Indian" in the United Kingdom, but rather a structuring of the emotional experience of male–male desire, and the alterity it so often engenders, through a dialogue with Indian history. Mukherjee suggests through this history the victimization of those who are branded native or foreign, Hindu or Muslim, upper or lower class, and hetero- or homosexual.[62]

Hence we are not surprised when, unlike Yudi, who is eventually stricken with metaphorical "wounds"[63] as a result of his experience of his own homosexuality, Ritwik is literally stabbed in King's Cross because of how others experience his race. Preluded by the incantation of "Send the fuckers back send those Paki scum away," the attack evokes the homogenizing impulse underlying racism, ending with Ritwik's descent into unconsciousness: "He . . . doesn't hear the desperate cry of 'You daft cunt, what the fuck have you done' repeated over and over, the sound of five sets of running, escaping feet, as his thin blood trickles out on to this dark corner of a back street that will be forever England."[64] Given that this event is succeeded by a final Miss Gilby passage, presumably composed by Ritwik, it could be argued that he does not perish here. Yet this seems untenable in light of the unambiguous reference to Rupert Brooke's celebrated poem "The Soldier": "If I should die, think only this of me/ That there's some corner of a foreign field/ Which is forever England." The implication is that zealous patriotism can easily become nationalistic violence, or perhaps that patriotism was nationalism all along. As well as providing a loose analogue of the attack on Miss Gilby (which did indeed occur in the "paddy fields" near Nawabgunj), this scene is steeped in irony. Ritwik is targeted because of his race, but, unlike the soldier of Brooke's poem, his nationality has no power to affect the soil on which he is murdered: it will not be "forever India." As the ultimate *tabula rasa*, Ritwik is an escapee from identity who is nonetheless killed because of it. At a larger level, the scene suggests the impossibility of dissolving identity markers and the attendant imbalance of power.

Conclusion

In *The Boyfriend* Rao seems to be advocating the dislocation of homosexual or gay identity from the union of identity markers such

as class, caste, language, and religion. Aligning the victimization of self-declared gay men like Yudi with communal violence, Rao demonstrates that gay identity in India is, far from being a static import, syncretically transformed by Indian history. Yet this is not an affirmative political statement, and the underlying message is pessimistic. Echoing the pervasive and all-powerful communalism behind the destruction of the Babri Masjid, "homosexuality" will always be syncretized with a nexus of identity markers over which it has no control. Mukherjee, by contrast, is more interested in the wholesale dissolution of identitarian definition than the secession of gayness or homosexuality from other aspects of identity. This definition, he suggests, results in alienation and the living of "a life apart" for those who are othered and do not wield their putative difference in the name of political resistance. Instead of identitarian syncretism, Mukherjee explores how the affective dimensions of Indian history inform the "homosexual" Indian man's feelings of alienation in 1990s Britain.

In Mukherjee's writing the possibility of transcendence is remote, represented twofold by Ritwik's ultimate failure to elude the processes of categorization, and the downfall of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal because of a dogged insistence on individual identity. Yet the ultimate worldviews of these novels are not nihilistic: while they do not propose any enduring alternative to the social structures they critique, Rao and Mukherjee capture moments in which these structures almost dissolve. When Milind and Yudi spend a week together in the latter's apartment, their intermittent bliss is removed from the invidious identifications of the outside world. At the end of this period:

> They acted like lovers whom fate was cruelly separating for years. Yudi had tears in his eyes. The week had shown him that human beings were not meant to live alone; there was something to be said for being in a relationship. If he valued his privacy (or thought he did) that could merely be a case of sour grapes.[65]

Fleetingly at least, Yudi and Milind's divergent class, caste, and sexual identifications are subsumed by the egalitarianism of the "lovers" pitted not against society but "fate," and Yudi mentally pares away identitarian taxonomies until only "human beings" remain. Similarly, when Ritwik is cottaging in the St. Giles Toilets, identity is briefly superseded by a more visceral and instinctive commonality. These

transient alternatives are neither celebratory nor transcendental, but, as glimpses of a counterfactual existence, they do offer some scope for change. Even if such salutary effects are absent from the diegesis, it is through critique that Rao and Mukherjee's novels suggest that imminent action is required.

CHAPTER 5

Transitional Mediations: Homosexuality in *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages*, and *Quest/Thaang*

Introduction

Until the 1990s overt representations of homosexuality were almost unknown in popular Indian cinema, but examples of intense male homosociality have been prevalent throughout the hundred-year history of the medium. Most critics agree that this reached an apogee in the "buddy" film of the 1970s and 1980s; in works such as *Namak Haram* (*Forbidden Salt*) and *Andar Bahar* (*Inside Outside*), male homosocial attachments eclipse male–female bonding, with the male protagonists frequently declaring their indissoluble commitment to their *yaars* or *dosts*.[1] This relationship, often articulated in song, is portrayed as all-conquering and eternal. To see this in action, we need only turn to "*Yah Dosti*," Jai (Amitabh Bachchan) and Veeru's (Darmendra) famous duet in *Sholay*:[2]

Jai: Your sorrow is my sorrow, my life is your life/ That is how our love is (Terā gam merā gam, meri jān teri jān/ Aisa apnā pyār)
Veeru: I will even risk my life, for you I will take on (Jān pe bhī khelenge, tere lie le lenge)
Jai: I will even risk my life, for you I will take on (Jān pe bhī khelenge, tere lie le lenge)
Both: Enmity with everyone (Sab se duśmani)
Jai: We will not break this friendship (Yah dostī ham nahī̃ toṛenge)

Veeru: I will stop breathing but (Toṛenge dam magar)
Both: I will not abandon you (Terā sāth na choṛ denge)
Jai: People see two of us, but/ Look, we are not two
(Logō ko āte haĩ do nazar ham magar/ Dekho do nahĩ̃)
Both: For our entire lives/ We will not break this friendship
(Sāri zindagī/ Yah dostī ham nahĩ̃ toṛenge)

The love ("*pyār*") between Jai and Veeru is sovereign in this song, and their promises of devotion and fidelity are similar to modern narratives of monogamous marriage. They can also be aligned with older traditions of same-sex friendship in India and Euro-America, on which, as Ruth Vanita has shown, contemporary matrimony is based.[3] The lyrics of the duet, along with the manner in which the two men repeat and share the same adoring lines, suggest an intense bond which has more in common with current formulations of romantic and erotic love than friendship, although this overlap could be accommodated within Indian categories like *yaari* and *dosti*. Critics from Tharayil Muraleedharan to Raj Rao have proposed queer interpretations of these songs, with the latter also invoking the intensely (homo)sexual atmosphere of the darkened cinema hall, which was partly brought into being by such depictions.[4]

These critical strategies are precipitated by the absence of explicit love and sex between men in earlier films,[5] but in recent years overtly homosexual relationships have begun to coexist with romantic homosociality. In the 1990s several films included gay men in cameo roles, a trend exemplified by the 1991 hit *Mast Kalandar*, which features a heavily stereotyped gay male character named Pinku. As Shohini Ghosh argues, "The emergence of new sexualities and a diversity of desires in cinema are clearly a response to many years of feminist and queer rights movements"[6]; while she may overstate the power of feminist and queer politics to radically influence Bollywood, she does usefully highlight the potential for cross-fertilization. With increasingly open representations of homosexuality has come increasing ambivalence, however, both across the industry and within films themselves. Contemporary portrayals in popular Indian cinema range from opprobrium, epitomized by the Tamil film *Vettaiyadu Villaiyadu*, in which the homicidal tendencies of two serial killers on the run are linked to their homosexuality, to more nuanced and sympathetic depictions in films like *Dunno Y—Na Jaane Kyun*.[7] The latter centralizes the love and sex relationship of its two self-identified gay

male protagonists, also exploring the deployment of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code as a weapon of intimidation and blackmail. As I noted in the Introduction, on July 2, 2009, Section 377 was read down by the Delhi High Court as a result of a petition led by the Naz Foundation, around a year prior to the release of *Dunno Y—Na Jaane Kyun*. This landmark decision instantiated what Fareed Kazmi has called "the amazing overlap between the dominant political discourse and that of conventional cinema,"[8] and it is unsurprising that the post-Section 377 period bore witness to an efflorescence of films that explored homosexuality. At present it is unclear to what extent the reinstatement of the law in December 2013, after the Supreme Court's decision that the Delhi High Court's repeal was invalid, will attenuate or even reverse some of these changes in Bollywood. Nonetheless, Kazmi's words signpost how popular Indian cinema both reflects and produces the "dominant political discourse," albeit with junctures of resistance and dissent, a contention that provides a point of departure for this chapter.

I have chosen to foreground three films made in the five years prior to the reading-down of Section 377, all of which centralize sympathetic portrayals of men who sexually desire men: Anirban Dhar's *My Brother Nikhil* (2005), Amol Palekar's *Quest/Thaang* (2006), and Sridhar Rangayan's *68 Pages* (2007).[9] Ruth Vanita has remarked that *My Brother Nikhil* is a "transitional film,"[10] and part of my argument is that *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages*, and *Quest* contributed to a transition from the gay cameos of the 1990s to the fully fledged homosexual protagonists of present-day popular cinema. While ostensibly granting unmediated and sensitive access to the subjectivity of the homosexual Indian male, all three films filter his consciousness through two principal devices: HIV/AIDS and the "modern," "liberal," and "sympathetic" Indian woman. These indispensable tropes guard against the potential accusations of the Board of Censors and conservative members of the audience, as opposed to their numerous liberal counterparts, that the representation of homosexuality is either superfluous or at odds with "traditional" Indian culture. Given such constraints, the films do not fully embrace this dynamic of filtering and combination, and they periodically suggest that the identity of the homosexual should be depicted independently. There is a palpable trajectory from *My Brother Nikhil*, through *68 Pages* and ending in *Quest/Thaang*, whereby the woman, HIV/AIDS, and homosexuality

become increasingly discrete, which in some ways parallels the burgeoning recognition and acceptance of homosexuality in India during this period.

Yet the open representation of homosexuality, diverging as it does from the male–male bonding of pre-1990s Bollywood film, has its limitations. Ajay Gehlawat remarks that "Homoerotic play . . . has paradoxically become less subversive now that it has been 'outed'."[11] He correctly identifies how a previously subversive politics could be joined by a vocal and oppositional analogue, obeying a binary logic of anti-normative homosexuality, but the uniformity of his analysis is problematic. To reiterate Eve Sedgwick's account, "Issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another, but instead by the relations enabled by the unrationalized coexistence of different models during the times that they do coexist."[12] The same can be said of popular Indian cinema, in which the appearance of apparently new forms of "outed" homosexuality does not indicate usurpation, but a shifting representational paradigm. "Subversive" depictions of homosocial desire both inflect current representations of homosexuality *and* continue to exist in many films that do not contain homosexual characters. An initially Euro-American homosexuality does not obliterate other elements of Indian culture like class, caste, and religion; instead, as the following examples of femininity and HIV/AIDS imply, it exists in volatile syncretism with them.

Some eyebrows may be raised at the present choice of films, and it could be argued that the vastly popular *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana*,[13] both produced by Karan Johar, are more meaningful barometers and determinants of public and political sentiment, contributing to Bollywood's ever more overt and empathetic engagements with homosexuality. Madhavankutty Pillai is right to describe these two films as "a sort of guerilla method of getting the unspeakable into the drawing room,"[14] and their strategies of mimicry and farce are metonymic for a range of different devices used to filter homosexuality during what I am calling the "transitional" period. As noted in the Introduction, however, *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana* ultimately stress that their characters are straight, exoticizing homosexuality for commercial purposes without challenging dominant models of heterosexuality, presenting an ambivalent "phobic" and "erotic" dialectic. The films in this chapter differ from these models in their careful

dismantling of the "phobic" and their reluctance to indulge in the autotelic pleasure of the "erotic." Taking an unapologetically didactic approach, they locate homosexuality in India, instead of portraying a liminal copy that occurs thousands of miles away. *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages*, and *Quest* are underexplored and under-theorized, a lacuna that demands attention. Before mapping the syncretic mediation used by these films, including its motivation and political implications, I examine the role of HIV/AIDS as an optic which has allowed homosexuality to become increasingly public in India. Subsequently, I consider how each film presents particular, immediately identifiable conceptions of Indian womanhood, as well as narratives of HIV/AIDS, in order to propel audiences from a visceral rejection to an embryonic acceptance of homosexuality.

HIV/AIDS

The proliferation of HIV/AIDS in India has created a discursive space in which previously marginalized practices and identities of same-sex desire and gender nonnormativity are discussed, albeit in subordination to the more licit epidemiological struggle. In *AIDS Sutra*, Amartya Sen clearly delineates this link: "Among the many implications of the AIDS epidemic is the need to normalise a kind of sex that many people find perfectly normal, no matter how distressed some others are even at the thought of such relations."[15] HIV/AIDS does not simply bulldoze sexual taboos, however. Ravi K. Verma et al. have noted the "extreme stigmatizing of persons who contract the infection, regardless of the source."[16] This eschewal depends on the tacit recognition of the multiple etiologies of the virus *and* the disappearance of ratiocination in the immediate, visceral reaction to the deformity of the AIDS-afflicted body. Yet at first it was primarily from the platform of HIV/AIDS awareness that homosexuality could be articulated, epitomized by ABVA's *Less than Gay: A Citizens' Report* (see Introduction), and, later, the Naz Foundation's Mumbai conference on MSM and gay identities, HIV/AIDS, and sexual health in 1994.[17] The conference was permeated with an unspoken conflict between its official purpose as a platform from which to develop strategies for HIV/AIDS awareness among MSMs and the goals of activists like Ashok Row Kavi to form a gay identity and community counting the virus as just one of its concerns.

In his opening address, Dr. Subhash Salunke, the director of Bombay's Department of Health, averred:

> Ashok, Shiv and delegates. I am proud that I am inaugurating the first conference of gay South Asian men in Bombay today. As the HIV/AIDS pandemic progresses in India, many kinds of sexual behaviours which we deny at present will be acknowledged.[18]

Dr. Salunke's prediction suggests that HIV/AIDS is closely linked to, perhaps inseparable from, nonnormative sexual practices. The causal link he postulates implies that the virus not only necessitates the acknowledgment of "many kinds of sexual behaviours" and identities, but also discursively produces them. More broadly, HIV/AIDS has been instrumental in forming collectives of gay men, *kothis* and *hijras* which were less common prior to the inception of the virus, partly because of the requirements of international funding bodies (see Introduction). The Naz Conference encapsulates the incipient, somewhat counterintuitive optimism surrounding the links between the emergence of HIV/AIDS, the transition toward group solidarity among MSMs and homosexuals, and the public recognition and acceptance of nonnormative sexual practices and identities.

Since the Naz Conference was held some 20 years ago, HIV/AIDS policy in India has undergone a seismic shift. Although the Indian Government created the National AIDS Committee in 1986 and the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) in 1992, among the general public HIV- and AIDS-related information remained scarce until the early 1990s. Change accelerated with the first two seven-year National AIDS Control Programmes (1992–1999 and 1999–2006) and the creation of a National Council on AIDS chaired by the Prime Minister. The period since 2006, comprehending the Third and Fourth Programs, has borne witness to many more interventions, around which there have proliferated discourses of physical and emotional care, antidiscrimination, preventative measures, safe sex, and so forth. It is within such a climate that the attempted treatment and destigmatization of HIV/AIDS, and the concomitant recognition of previously silenced or outlawed practices and identities of same-sex desire, must be viewed. Dennis Altman argues that "There is a gradual shift toward conceptualizing sexuality as a central basis for identity in most parts of the world in which HIV programs have played a significant role,"[19] a change encouraged by the intervention of

international organizations like UNAIDS, but in India HIV outreach has also attempted to address, maintain, and constitute the specificity of groups like *kothis* and *hijras*.[20] In this context, the imbrication of cinema and politics is clear; *68 Pages*, which explores HIV/AIDS, same-sex desire, and gender nonnormativity, was mandatorily screened at NACO counselor training programs after its release in 2007.[21] Popular cinema, with its wide geographical penetration and its ability to communicate with the educated and uneducated alike, is the obverse of a swiftly multiplying literature surrounding HIV/AIDS, although their telos may be different. Whereas the recognition, tolerance, and discursive production of nonnormative gender and sexual practices and identities might emerge collaterally from the new strategies of epidemiological intervention, films like *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages*, and *Quest* suggest that they exist *a priori* and must be normalized via the expeditious medium of politically sanctioned HIV/AIDS awareness.

My Brother Nikhil

My Brother Nikhil depicts the life of the Goan state swimming champion Nikhil Kapoor (Sanjay Suri), who contracts HIV and is ostracized by his family, the local community, and the state.[22] Expelled from the swimming team, his job, and the parental home, he is interred in a dilapidated sanatorium by the authorities and released only after a prolonged legal battle. His final years are spent in the house of his lover, Nigel (Purab Kohli), although once nearing death he is brought home by his repentant mother and father. It is not my intention to dispense a homily on *My Brother Nikhil*'s "good" or "bad" sexual politics, a tendentious but common approach to gay and lesbian cinema that Ellis Hanson has questioned.[23] Of far greater interest is the film's need to both represent and circumscribe love between men as a means of tentatively introducing cinematic narratives of homosexuality to Indian audiences.

While ostensibly about homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, *My Brother Nikhil* insists on the ascendancy of the love between the eponymous protagonist and his sister, Anamika (Juhi Chawla), in order to mitigate these primary themes. The film's title represents Nikhil not as an autonomous individual, but as part of Anu's subjectivity. Shot in flashbacks introduced by Anu and her parents, Navin (Victor Banerjee) and Anita Rosario Kapoor (Lilette Dubey), *My Brother Nikhil* suggests that Nikhil's sister, and, to a lesser degree, his mother

and father, are necessary intermediaries between the audience and the homosexual man. By underscoring the family's willingness to tell Nikhil's story, the film posits affirmation as the extra-diegetic frame of the events of the retrospective narrative. If moments of revulsion within the diegesis are alleviated accordingly, the audience is also encouraged to align itself with the enlightened narrative present of parental acceptance, which seems to have emerged, Phoenix-like, from an "ignorant" and "intolerant" narrative past. In addition to reassuring more conservative viewers, this privileging reflects the profound importance of blood relations in India, distinguishing *My Brother Nikhil* from those Euro-American works that portray alternative gay and lesbian communities outside the biological family. The American version of the television drama *Queer as Folk*,[24] for instance, only contains one meaningful example of biological kinship (between Michael (Hal Sparks) and his mother (Sharon Gless)), focusing almost exclusively on the friendships and chosen families of its queer protagonists. *My Brother Nikhil* avoids definitively sundering the biological family partly by evading Nikhil's "coming out" as "homosexual" and instead foregrounding the revelation that he is HIV positive, which produces the unvoiced assumption among the film's characters that he has sex with men. As his potentially alien orientation is codified as an illness, the stage is set for the film's ultimate familial reintegration without any lingering sense of insurmountable alterity, but the parental acceptance of Nikhil's positive status inevitably carries with it the tacit recognition and tolerance of his homosexuality. This clearly pedagogical aim does not necessarily vitiate *My Brother Nikhil*'s aesthetic appeal. Arvind Singhal and P. N. Vasanti, writing of the 2004 HIV/AIDS-themed film *Phir Milenge*, have noted the utility of Bollywood's "entertainment-education strategy," which "abrogates a needless dichotomy that mass media programs must be entertaining *or* educational." The appeal of such films "comes from [their] narrative approach, which is not perceived as didactic or preachy by audience members."[25] Like *Phir Milenge*, which tells the story of the HIV-positive Tamanna's (Shilpa Shetty) social ostracization and subsequent pursuit of legal justice, *My Brother Nikhil* relies on a careful synergy of the pedagogical and the entertaining to impart its message to the Indian public.

Unlike Nikhil's initially opprobrious parents, Anu supports him throughout his illness. Seeking solace from his sister and not his lover, Nigel, when he learns that he is HIV positive, Nikhil rests his head

on her lap and tearfully declares his love for her. His infantile self-positioning demonstrates that Anu is playing the necessary, nurturing role of sister and mother, especially given the absence of real maternal and paternal sympathy. In their physical intimacy these scenes also verge on eroticism, and within the diegesis almost all forms of male–female love, including the familial and the romantic, are contained in the brother-sister relationship. These bonds are likely to inspire empathy, especially in North India, where they are often imbued with intense romantic feeling, epitomized by the *raksha bandhan* (*rakhi*) festival, in which sisters tie the sacred thread around the wrists of biological and self-chosen brothers. That a single woman can satisfy diverse masculine exigencies is also redolent of hegemonic Indian narratives of femininity and maternity, encompassed in mythologies of *devi*, the mother goddess. The psychoanalyst and cultural commentator Sudhir Kakar has noted the contemporary importance of the mythic in India as "a cultural idiom which aids the individual in the construction and integration of his inner world"[26]; while such analysis is often reductionist, he aptly identifies the widespread internalization of religious mythology, even in secular contexts. Hindu icons—be they a Sita, a Radha, or a Shakti—have influenced the modern Indian conception of the feminine, and many of their eulogized traits appear in Anu. As Devdutt Pattanaik observes of *devi*:

> Through the ages, man has sought to either control or escape from the world around him. When both enterprises seem futile, he turns to the mother-goddess. And she offers him nourishment, strength, validation and unconditional love, so that man can come to terms with the world as it is, not as it should be. This, in essence, is the Shakta heritage.[27]

Seeing Anu as the incarnation of a matriarchal goddess would be exaggerated, for she is also markedly modern and secular, but as the purveyor of "nourishment" and "unconditional love" to the childlike Nikhil, she does personify a revered and transcendental maternity. Perhaps most importantly, Anu, like the female protagonists of *68 Pages* and *Quest*, is emphatically heterosexual, recalling Gayatri Gopinath's argument that the "queer" or female–female-desiring sexual subject is rendered unthinkable or *impossible* by patriarchal accounts of South Asian womanhood.[28] In *My Brother Nikhil*, the tolerance and acceptance of the homosexual male can only be achieved at the expense of the female intermediary, who must conform to dominant conceptions of Indian cultural purity if she is to be an effective buffer

between Nikhil and conservative members of the viewing public. Within this teleological logic, to imagine her as queer or lesbian would be counterproductive.

Nikhil and Nigel enjoy moments of physical intimacy in conventionally romantic locations like the seashore, but Anu alleviates the spectatorial unease these encounters might cause by engaging in bodily contact with both men throughout the film. In this respect her diegetic function oscillates between the desexualization of all sexuality, including male–male desire (if Nikhil touches Nigel and his sister in the same way, neither act can be deemed erotic), and its reconstitution as singularly heterosexual (the sexual contact Anu has with Nikhil or Nigel exceeds and thus eclipses the men's homoerotic physicality). Here there are echoes of what Eve Sedgwick has called "the suppleness and organizing power of the triangular schema,"[29] from whence emerges "a male–male love that . . . is set firmly within a structure of institutionalized social relations that are carried out via women"[30] (figure 5.1). Within a comparable "schema," Nigel can embrace Anu and put his hands in hers, and she can even refer to him as "my boyfriend," without any suggestion of sexual attraction. But the audience, seeing them in the intimate poses usually reserved for romantic lovers, cannot discount the possibility of heterosexual passion. This is not to say that Nigel and Nikhil are never alone, but these moments are infrequent and outweighed by the dominant presence of the natal family. Nikhil says, "I love you" to Anu and not Nigel before his death, with Nigel only able to express his adoration for his moribund boyfriend through the film's theme song, "*Le Chale, Le Chale*." While this ballad is obviously about love, the gender of

Figure 5.1 *My Brother Nikhil*: Nigel, Anu, and Nikhil

the addressee is not explicit. Rachel Dwyer has observed how the lack of gender specificity in the love songs of popular films has assisted in their appropriation by gay viewers,[31] a trend exemplified by Ali, the gay protagonist of Ghalib Shiraz Dhalla's novel *Ode to Lata*,[32] who is obsessed with such songs and their performance by Lata Mangeshkar, the Bollywood playback singer widely hailed as a "gay icon" throughout India and its diaspora. By contrast, throughout *My Brother Nikhil* a potentially gay love song is granted universal applicability by its genderless lyrics, displacing a disturbing articulation of male–male love. First sung by Nikhil when Anu and her future husband, Sam (Gautam Kapoor), are dancing, then by Anu upon Nikhil's release from the sanatorium, and finally by Nigel as Nikhil is dying, the ballad includes the lines:

> The moonlight smiles (cā̃dnī muskarāye)
> when the breeze says something. (jab havā kuch kahe)
> . . .
> When the darkness grows dense in the atmosphere
> (jo ghanā ho fizā mẽ ādherā)
> I will bring morning for you. (lāyenge ham savere tere lie)
> I took them with me, I took them with me (le cale le cale)
> these caravans of memories. (yādõ ke ye kāfile)

With its imagery of nature, light, and darkness, as well as the metaphor of the "caravan of memories," "*Le Chale*" may proleptically suggest the persistence of the spirit after death, but this is only one interpretation; others might include the ending of a relationship or an emphatic declaration of romantic or familial love. As in "*Yah Dosti*," the emphasis is on how the singer will always accompany the addressee, although in *My Brother Nikhil* the duo is not always male. Instead, heterosexual love, sisterly/maternal/familial love and homosexual love are syncretized, undifferentiated, by the lyrics of the song and its positioning within the narrative.

Onir's decision to make his characters perform "*Le Chale*" diegetically in realist contexts like a party is at odds with the extra-diegetic songs or the fantastical "song-dance" which "diverges from the text at the level of semantics,"[33] associated with most Bollywood films. Instead of allowing polysemic interpretations born of extra-diegetic "excess", this strategy contains the homosexual love song in advance. Presumably Onir recognized that reinventing a song like "*Yah Dosti*" as an explicitly gay love ballad, or generally delineating a more substantive homosexuality, would jeopardize the film's reception among both the

censors and conservative members of the audience. As he remarked in 2008:

> I was literally shaking once the film was given for censorship approval. When I met them they said that we will give the film a "U" certificate provided you give a statement at the beginning that it's a fictitious film, which I was ready to comply with. And for me this was a huge thing, I mean we live in a country, which is still very outdated in terms of its views on sexuality, especially alternate sexuality.[34]

The reaction of the Board of Censors and the certificate awarded must have partly stemmed from an awareness of the film's usefulness for HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns. While Onir represents "alternate sexuality" as central, it was probably ancillary to the censors' decision, which appears more concerned with the film's critique of the Goan state's handling of the D'Souza case than with its homosexual content. This reflects Onir's deft negotiation of his theme; unlike *Dunno Y—Na Jaane Kyun*, which Cinemax and Fun Cinemas in Mumbai refused to screen, *My Brother Nikhil* encountered minimal hostility on its general release. If the film succeeds in telling a gay love story by filtering it through the character of Anu, homosexuality itself is syncretized with affective, developmental, and nationalist discourses of Indian womanhood; it is unimaginable outside the purview of these narratives. As Sandip Roy remarks, "One thing Indians do understand . . . is family drama. With Bollywood star Juhi Chawla—a sort of Meg Ryan of wholesomeness—playing Nikhil's sister, the film, Onir says, gets its point across 'without making anyone uncomfortable, without threatening anyone.' "[35] In this way, *My Brother Nikhil* encourages the public acceptance of homosexuality by incorporating it into more "wholesome" narratives of Indian femininity. The potency of these narratives is not to be underestimated, straddling as they do Bollywood and wider fields of sociopolitical representation, clearly evidenced in the crucial role played by heterosexual women like Arundhati Roy and Shabana Azmi in achieving the reading-down of Section 377. Outraged by its subsequent reinstatement, the former attended a protest at Jantar Mantar on December 15, 2013, claiming that "The judgement has struck down the rights of our community. By doing so, it has dislodged the keystone of our democratic setup." The latter, a vocal proponent of gay and lesbian rights for over a decade, tweeted: "Shocking judgement! Upholding 377 is violative of human rights n anti democratic."

My Brother Nikhil's representation of the privations undergone by its eponymous protagonist, including his mistreatment at the hands of the authorities and, latterly, his rapidly decaying body, arouses a spectatorial sympathy for the HIV/AIDS sufferer which extends to tolerance of his sexual orientation. The virus also controls and desexualizes homosexuality, which is discursively produced as a result of the openness demanded by a visible and articulated pathogenesis. The increasing acceptance of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality among the film's initially censorious local community, who are interviewed individually throughout the narrative, is both mimetic and prescriptive. Shohini Ghosh has analyzed these aspects of *My Brother Nikhil*'s documentary style:

> By making this documentary trope central to the narrative, the film builds a stylistic affinity to an entire tradition of subaltern narratives. Just as the documentary itself is a marginal province of the cinematic universe, *My Brother Nikhil* locates the marginal protagonist of Bombay cinema—the homosexual man—at the centre of the narrative.[36]

Ghosh does not fully explore *My Brother Nikhil*'s adherence to the pedagogical aims of the documentary genre. If Onir's goal was partly to educate a supposedly unaware public about HIV/AIDS, such an education does not consist of the usual injunction to practice safe sex, epitomized by works like Mira Nair's short film *Migration*,[37] in which the message is simple, writ large in block capitals on a black screen prior to the closing credits: "PROTECT THOSE YOU LOVE. WEAR A CONDOM." *My Brother Nikhil* attempts to dispel this insistence on sexual transmission, with Nigel remarking retrospectively: "Nikhil ko yah bīmārī kaise hui? Is ki kaī vajahē ho sakti thī lekin maī āp ke sāth vah discuss nahī karnā cāhtā kyōki . . . savāl yah hai ki is bīmārī ke bād us ke sāth kya kya huā" ("How did Nikhil get this illness? There could be several reasons, but I don't want to discuss it with you. Because the question is what happened to him after he got this illness"). The refusal to divulge how Nikhil became infected can partly be interpreted as a demurral to expound on identities and practices of homosexuality. By focusing on the culpability of those who mistreated Nikhil because of his HIV-positive status, Nigel diverts attention away from the moral implications of contracting the virus through male–male sex, which has the paradoxical effects of vindicating this practice and returning it to the realm of the unspoken. Later he verbalizes and invites a discussion of homosexuality: "Ve log

samajhte haĩ ki (those people understand that) it's err a homosexual disease . . . Mere sāre tests clear āye (all my tests came out clear) . . . Our relationship had nothing to do with the disease. I was not HIV positive." Although the expression of homosexuality only seems realizable via narratives of HIV/AIDS, Nigel is debunking the fallacy that being gay and HIV positive are synonymous.

While attempting to separate HIV/AIDS and male–male sex by withholding the source of infection, *My Brother Nikhil* only gestures toward an independently legible and politicized homosexual identity. If the film's syncretic combination of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality partly justifies its sympathetic portrayal of a gay protagonist, this necessity results in the ambivalent suggestion that HIV-positive status and homosexuality are inseparable *and* that the latter can and should exist independently of pathology. Nikhil's release and the recognition of his rights as an AIDS patient, though apparently designative of general moral progress, are not accompanied by extended discussions of homosexuality or male–male desire. *My Brother Nikhil* implies that a declamatory homosexual identity is justifiable in the context of health provision and individual rights, but its ultimate message is not *openly* gay-affirmative. The effectiveness of these strategies, emblematic of the "transition" from the minor gay characters of the 1990s to the psychologically complex homosexuals of post-2009 cinema, is intimated by Parmesh Shahani, who remarks that after watching *My Brother Nikhil*, his "straight friends . . . while they had been uncomfortable discussing [his] homosexuality before, now . . . had a context to ask [him] all the questions they had wanted to."[38]

68 Pages

> Ashok Row Kavi told me that the only way India would accept gays was via AIDS awareness. This is too little, too late. Freedom is not begged for; it is snatched.[39]

Sridhar Rangayan's *68 Pages*, an AIDS awareness film produced on behalf of the Mumbai-based Humsafar Trust, charts the interactions of a female HIV/AIDS counselor, Mansi (Mouli Ganguly), and the HIV-positive individuals who seek her help. These include a *kothi*, a female prostitute, a wealthy businessman, and ultimately a homosexual colleague at the HIV/AIDS clinic where Mansi works. The film ends with Mansi preparing to take up a place at Columbia University in order

to study Public Health and HIV prevention. According to Vikram Phukan, *68 Pages* "plays out as a melodrama rather than merely a public awareness infomercial about AIDS and safe sex."[40] Resembling *My Brother Nikhil* in its "entertainment-education" strategy, *68 Pages* has also been central in national programs of HIV/AIDS counseling and prevention. Its presentation of nonnormative gender and sexual identities is coextensively didactic, suggesting a pedagogical agenda that goes beyond the acceptance of HIV-positive individuals. In this sense, it is the successor of Rangayan's earlier film *Gulabi Aaina*,[41] which combines the threat of HIV with an exhaustive representation of the lives of *kothis* and gay men. If *68 Pages* aims to disperse the myths and prejudices surrounding HIV/AIDS, it too establishes multiple contexts from which the virus is absent.

Recalling *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages* uses the sympathy of the modern Indian woman to filter its depictions of male–male desire. Mansi is based on a real-life figure, Vrushali Deshmukh, of whom Vivek Anand, the co-writer and producer of the film, remarks:

> She worked with us from 1999 to the fall of 2004 and handled over 6,000 cases involving MSMs and transgenders in Mumbai . . . And like her onscreen character Mansi, she too did go to the Columbia University to do her Masters in Public Health.[42]

Idealized in a similar fashion to Deshmukh, Mansi is an optic through which the identities and behaviors of the characters of *68 Pages* can evolve, and her present-day acceptance prefigures all the events of the diegesis. If Anu's production of the narrative is emphasized by the documentary form, Mansi is presenting a reality that she has already textualized in the 68 pages of her diary. Her narratorial control is established at the outset, when within diegetic/past time she is riding an autorickshaw to work and her current self provides a voiceover: "P̃ach insān, p̃ach zindagīyā, ek dusre se judā, bilkul alag. Tab maī unhē nahī jānti thī." ("Five human beings, five lives, each one separate from the other. Absolutely different. No, I didn't know them then"). As the screen becomes a montage of five portraits representing Paayal (Jayati Bhatia), Umrao/Umesh (Uday Sonawane), Nishit (Zafar Karachiwala), Kiran (Joy Sengupta) and Nathu (Abhay Kulkarni), these "human beings" ("*insān*"), irrespective of their diegetic autonomy, are united by Mansi's subjectivity in order to affirm their commonality and solidarity.

Mansi is a progressive woman working with heterogeneous sexual and gender minorities, but she is also visibly traditional. Dressed for mobility rather than sexual self-display, her character is opposed to the excessively "Westernized" archetypes of the "vamp" in 1970s and 1980s popular cinema and the frequently semi-clothed heroine of more recent films like Madhur Bhandarkar's *Fashion*.[43] In a comparable dialectic, she demonstrates professionalism and boundless sympathy, the ethics of which are questioned by Aarthi Chandrasekhar:

> There is an assumption that the film deals with the counsellor-counsellee relationship and provides a best practice model. There are several problems with the way this relationship is portrayed . . . As a counsellor, Mansi does not maintain the physical distance from the client that professional ethics would demand . . . Mansi comes across as a counsellor who is unable to draw a line between her personal and professional life. Her life seems to be ruled by her profession. While professional counselling ethics demand that counsellors do not socialize with their clients, Mansi seems to cross the boundaries.[44]

Mansi's ability to cross boundaries, apparently a deficiency in the real-world counselor, but a prerequisite in the world of Bollywood melodrama, is key in gaining the trust of her counselees and eliciting the audience's acceptance of HIV/AIDS and homosexuality. Even though *68 Pages* is far from "a best practice model," its use in NACO training programs highlights the didactic potential of representations of women's sympathy for HIV sufferers, which in turn reflects the widespread patriarchal ennoblement of feminine compassion.

In a scene on a Mumbai beach, when Kiran asks Mansi if she has fallen in love, she replies that she would rather be accepted by Columbia University. This admission comes in the wake of her final banishment of Ranvir (Bakul Thakker), a former partner who refused to marry her five years earlier because he feared that his family would not accept her occupation. The film's lingering emphasis on her failed relationship reinforces her heterosexuality even as it stems from her insistence on working with individuals who exist in opposition to or outside this norm. Like Anu, Mansi must be straight in order to successfully mediate between conservative members of the audience and the film's representation of nonnormative sexual practices and identities, and her rejection of love is conformist rather than countercultural. Specifically, it ventriloquizes Gandhian attitudes toward the ideal social position of Indian women, which Nivedita Menon has analyzed:

> Gandhi . . . insisted on the absolute personal dignity and autonomy of women in the family and society. This understanding that women had the right to the inviolability of their bodies challenged the basis of marriage as an institution. But the alternative he offered was asceticism and celibacy.[45]

Dichotomizing the much-revered Columbia University and love transforms the latter into an impediment to the upliftment of women, and Mansi's adamantine chastity links her closely to the project of Gandhian nation-building, for she plans to return to work among "our own people" ("hamāre log"). Syncretizing an idealized femininity and its political centralization in national development (see Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana[46]) with representations of HIV/AIDS, homosexuality, and same-sex desire, *68 Pages* grants commensurate importance to these usually divergent discourses.

With her implicit yearning to mother "our people," the subaltern homosexuals, *kothis*, and HIV/AIDS sufferers of India, Mansi resembles *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), a trope immortalized by the Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in his 1882 novel *Anandamath*, which took center stage in anticolonial campaigns and many postindependence programs of national improvement.[47] Given that Ashok Row Kavi, founder and director of the Humsafar trust, is a devout Hindu, any suggestion of religious nationalism in the film is not coincidental, but Mansi is primarily a secular figure in a secular environment. Echoing the characterization of Anu, there is a masculinist worldview latent in the syncretic fusion of Mansi's Gandhian temperance and feminine sympathy with nonnormative sexualities and the HIV-afflicted, and she is clearly being instrumentalized within a recognizable genealogy of patriarchal nationalism.

In *68 Pages* nonnormative sex and sexuality are also validated by HIV/AIDS, but their conflation is prevented by the elaboration of two characters with discrete male–male desiring identities prior to their infection. The first is Umrao/Umesh, a biological male who self-identifies as Umrao when attired as a woman and Umesh when clothed as a man; the second is Mansi's colleague Kiran. Umrao/Umesh's particular gender and sexual performance align her/him with *kothi* identity: like many of the *kothis* encountered by Gayatri Reddy in her anthropological study of *hijras* in Hyderabad,[48] s/he almost invariably wears women's clothing, and s/he is erroneously called a *hijra* twice in the film. On the first occasion, dressed in a sari, s/he has returned home from the dance bar where s/he works and her/his drunken brother

accuses her/him of being a *hijra*, also referring to her/him using feminine verb inflections and calling him his "sister" ("*bahin*"). Much later, when Umrao is soliciting among truck drivers and her/his partner refuses to wear a condom, the latter claims that there are plenty of other *hijras* in the vicinity whom he can have sex with. Interpreting Umrao/Umesh's identity as that of the *kothi* is apt given the prominence of *kothi* politics within the Humsafar Trust, as detailed by Parmesh Shahani and others. Well before s/he has contracted HIV, Umrao/Umesh is interviewed by Mansi, and s/he purports to be "truly a woman inside" ("maĩ andar se aurat hī hū̃"), recalling Gayatri Reddy's assertion that "*Kotis* . . . claimed to be more 'like women' in the things they desired and engaged in, defining this construct both in terms of sexual (receptive) performance and in terms of gendered acts outside the sexual realm."[49] Umrao/Umesh's self-description is not explicitly sexual, suggesting the film's endeavor to define *kothi* identity without introducing HIV/AIDS *ab initio*. At the same time, this elucidation is implicitly sanctioned by its occurrence in the AIDS counselor's office, reflecting Ashok Row Kavi's contention that some Indians will only accept homosexuality through HIV/AIDS awareness, which also necessitates the study of minority gender and sexual practices and identities. It could even be argued that these explorations are retrospectively justified by Umesh's ultimate infection with the virus, especially because s/he belongs to the "high-risk" group of "MSM" sex workers for most of the film. The portrayal of Umrao's identity transcends the exposition required for HIV prevention, however, in its unapologetic openness acquiring a political significance that parallels proclamatory, initially Euro-American gay and lesbian narratives. Umrao/Umesh is more candid than the Westernized gay man, Kiran, who longs for the openness of *kothi* existence. Inverting the association of gay identity with forthrightness and "indigenous" identities with silence, Rangayan complicates the ubiquitous binary opposition. If these politics seem remarkably nuanced for a popular film, they are also voiced before either Umrao or Kiran has learned that they are HIV positive.

68 Pages explores the dimensions of an affirmative gay existence that both contrasts and overlaps syncretically with its *kothi* counterpart. In a scene portraying Kiran's home life with his partner, Mohit, the men are playful and physically intimate, exchanging "I love yous" and discussing adopting a baby (figure 5.2). Their harmonious cohabitation legitimizes them *per se* in the eyes of the audience and also counteracts Indian cinema's numerous prejudicial depictions of homosexuality. As one YouTube viewer remarks, "Dostana and Fashion are crap portryal

Figure 5.2 *68 Pages:* Kiran and Mohit at home

[sic] of gays. This is the real thing, a gem, from film 68 Pages [sic]. Its cozy, it is loving, it is intimate . . . AND it is REAL. A Positive portrayal of an Indian gay couple. Kudos."[50] Kiran's HIV negativity is emphatic until the end of the film, and his gay identity is often discrete from HIV/AIDS prevention and awareness. His position as a researcher immediately distances him from sufferers of the virus, abetted by his knowledge of the perils of unprotected sex: "Har chah mahīne maī test ke lie jāta hū̃. Pehli bār . . . report collect karne se pahle mujhe to bukhār ho gaya . . . itnā nervous . . . Us rāt ham ne party ki kyōki meri report negative thī. Sāra pāp dhul gaya" ("Every six months I go for a test . . . The first time . . . before collecting the report I got fever . . . I was so nervous . . . That night we had a party because my report was negative. All my sin was washed away"). Rather than stemming from AIDS-related complexes, Kiran's fever is humorously psychosomatic, trivializing the threat of HIV and implying his exemption. The ultimate disclosure of his positive status is wholly unexpected, appended after the ostensible narrative closure of Mansi's voiceover on the happy endings enjoyed by her counselees and the repetition of the film's sentimental theme song, "*Chal mere sang*" ("Walk beside me"). On learning that he is HIV-positive, Kiran returns home and confronts Mohit:

Kiran: Tum ne aisa kyō kiyā? (Why did you do this?)
Mohit: Tum kyā kah rahe ho? (What are you saying?)
. . .

Kiran: Sorry to break the bad news, magar tum bhī positive ho (but you are positive as well). Maī ne tumhe trust kiyā thā (I trusted you). "Ham apne relationship mē, loyal rahenge, cheat nahī karenge (In our relationship we will remain loyal, we won't cheat). We promised! You promised! Why? Office se late ānā (coming late from the office) . . . salsa classes . . . You were cheating on me, cheating on me. Why? Why?"

Kiran is less preoccupied by the mortal implications of the virus than by Mohit's infidelity and breach of "trust." It is ironic that the film has thus far contrasted them with its HIV-positive protagonists, only to introduce their infection so belatedly and disjointedly at the end of the narrative, but the diagnosis retrospectively sanctions the extended portrayal of an affirmative gay identity.

This final scene suggests the impossibility of completely separating HIV/AIDS and homosexuality in the popular imagination. Here the result of homosexuality and cheating on one's partner, Kiran and Mohit's infection reaffirms the putative immorality of HIV. Yet the men's conversation also marginalizes the diagnosis itself and focuses on infidelity in a sympathetic gay relationship, suggesting its equivalence with heterosexual monogamy. Paradoxically, while HIV sanctions these expositions, it disappears amid the presentation of substantive gay ethics, epitomizing the film's ambivalence toward this necessary mediating topos. While syncretically dependent on the virus for their illumination, gay and *kothi* identities also attract discrete and nuanced delineation. If *68 Pages*, like *My Brother Nikhil*, relies on feminine approbation and maternal compassion to validate its portrayals of male–male desire and stave off the potentially homophobic responses of conservative members of the audience, its sustained attempts to disaggregate HIV/AIDS and nonnormative gender and sexual practices and identities differentiate it from its predecessor. At the same time, their independent representation is inconceivable during this transitional period.

Quest/Thaang

Unusually for a commercial film, Amol Palekar's *Quest/Thaang* (2006) was produced in both Marathi and English, aligning it with the infomercial or the documentary, two more overtly pedagogical "real-life" genres. *Quest* tells the story of Sai (Mrinal Kulkarni), a lawyer and Aditya's wife (Rishi Deshpande), who discovers that her husband

is having an affair with another man, Uday (Shishir Sharma). The film focuses on her anguish at Aditya's betrayal, subsequently charting their divorce and its aftermath. In the subplot Sai defends a young boy, Yatin Barve, who has been dismissed from school because his father is suffering from AIDS. In the vein of *My Brother Nikhil* and *68 Pages*, the film is unreservedly didactic, emblematized by its frequent punctuation of realist conversations with lengthy, formal pronouncements on homosexuality and HIV/AIDS. Amol Palekar himself has remarked:

> In our society sexuality is taboo. If ever we talk about it, we avoid serious discussion on sexual orientation, preferences and choices. This closeted approach keeps us from educating ourselves or from knowing the existing reality. Ignorance, prejudices and phobias flourish then, and as film-maker I feel the need to address them. That's how I did Daayra (1996), Anaahat (2003) and Thaang/Quest (2006). They provoked viewers to think of a transgender existence, a woman's sexual desires or genuineness of a gay relationship. As they come out of the theatre they feel compelled to adopt the humanitarian angle. This changed perspective is a tiny ripple I triggered through my films.[51]

If "orientation" and "preferences" are drawn from an initially Euro-American lexis of homosexuality, this identity is more outspoken in *Quest* than *My Brother Nikhil* or *68 Pages*. It also acquires greater independence in Palekar's film, which almost detaches the "genuineness of a gay relationship" from feminine endorsement and the transparency necessitated by HIV exposition and prevention.

Sai cannot be incorporated into hegemonic patriarchal narratives so easily as an Anu or a Mansi, owing in part to the authorship of the screenplay by Sandhya Gokhale, an avowed feminist and Palekar's wife and creative collaborator. Yet the film recalls *My Brother Nikhil* and *68 Pages* in its initial use of the female protagonist's subjectivity to refract homosexuality. The first character we encounter, Sai predominates in the diegesis, and she is the first to discover Aditya and Uday's relationship. Aditya's circumvallation within her subjectivity is emphasized when he is living in Bahrain: absent from his ex-wife's life, he also vanishes from the screen. Sai, like Anu and Mansi, is a paragon of Indian womanhood for many members of the audience. If her possessions and elegant car imply consumerist success, she also reconciles modern and traditional archetypes like barrister, wife, and mother, and she is emphatically heterosexual. By locating her within the Law, perhaps synecdochic for the Indian Constitution and its "substantive understanding of the practical dimensions of freedom and equality for

women,"[52] Gokhale emphasizes Sai's liberalism and implies the salutary feminization of the higher professions. While frequently involving her in cases unrelated to sexuality, her occupation grants her indisputable moral authority in her pronouncements on Aditya's identity and the anti-AIDS discrimination suffered by the Barve family. The legalistic gravity she provides is an antidote to those popular films that treat homosexuality as farce, a tendency described by Thomas Waugh as "the jokey juvenalization of . . . male figures in . . . [the] friendship narrative within a straight cinematic universe."[53] If *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana* rely on their protagonists' performance of a stereotyped gay relationship to generate a comedy of misunderstandings *abroad*, *Quest* exaggeratedly reproves this comforting whimsicality by avowing both the seriousness of homosexual identities and their *existence in India*.

Sai's consciousness is, however, more developed than that of Anu or Mansi, both of whom are only characterized with sufficient depth to cement their role as filters between nonnormative sexualities or HIV/AIDS and conservative members of the audience. Sai's flashbacks privilege her despondency over the exploration of homosexuality, and, in contrast with *My Brother Nikhil* and *68 Pages*, her sympathy for Aditya is not initially guaranteed. By dispensing with an extra-diegetic framing device, *Quest* dramatizes her ongoing struggle between obloquy and acceptance, which she is the first to recognize: "Oh! How can I forget that a progressive woman like me endorsing individual freedom is not supposed to throw a tantrum? A liberal wife is expected to support her closeted homosexual husband and offer her empathy, isn't she?" Even while alluding to the role of the modern, liberal, heterosexual Indian woman as a syncretic optic through which conservative members of the audience can be made to engage with affirmative depictions of homosexuality, she denies this function for herself because the gay man in question is her husband and not a brother or a counselee. After Sai's initial condemnation of Aditya's infidelity, she evolves into a spokeswoman for homosexuality, even entreating Uday to return to Aditya two years after the divorce. Clearly, her engagement with the men's relationship is a heuristic: once the impediment of marriage is removed, she becomes more openly sympathetic to Aditya's orientation and adopts a maternal stance toward him. By presenting this trajectory, Palekar encourages the audience's acceptance of homosexuality, displacing charges of misconduct onto the act of betrayal. Yet Sai's sustained focus on her own emotional "quest" figures her husband's gay affair as merely incidental to the

dissipation of the marriage. While using the woman as a filter to enable the portrayal of a publicly condonable homosexuality, *Quest* creates a more variegated femininity that cannot easily be conflated with tearful compassion or interpolated into discourses of sympathy for the homosexual male.

Quest exceeds *My Brother Nikhil* and *68 Pages* in its disaggregation of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, not by excluding the virus from the plot altogether, but by transposing it from Aditya and Uday onto other individuals. When Aditya is unexpectedly flown back from Bahrain to Mumbai with a mysterious illness, viewers might assume that he is stricken with AIDS, an interpretation initially encouraged but subsequently reproached by Gokhale/Palekar. Instead, his condition is the result of a suicide attempt precipitated by homophobic intimidation. Nigel's rejection of such heedless conflation springs to mind, but the detachment is more emphatic in *Quest* because there are no homosexual HIV/AIDS sufferers in evidence. The only potential connection between the virus and homosexuality is intimated by the AIDS-related death of Uday's previous partner in Malaysia, which nevertheless remains indistinct, temporally and spatially removed from the events of the narrative.

The only diegetic figures directly impacted by HIV/AIDS are not homosexual, nor can their predicament be linked to their behavior. In the second half of the film, Sai is approached by Mrs Barve, whose son has been excluded from school because his father is suffering from AIDS, and they discuss the situation:

> *Mrs. Barve*: Things might have been different, had I gone around begging for sympathy. Because I am supporting my husband, they don't miss a single opportunity to needle me and my child as well.
>
> *Sai*: Leave sympathy aside, what appalling ignorance! In a city like Bombay, how can a school assume a non-scientific and grossly incorrect position?

Illogically, Mrs. Barve is punished for being a dutiful wife—both she and her child are "innocent" victims, doubly castigated by the behavior of the father/husband and the disapproving public's fear of contagion. Dismissing the utility of "sympathy" in HIV/AIDS acceptance, Sai adopts a developmental position and constitutes the virus as an object of law and science rather than the physical symptom of a moral affliction. Later, when her colleagues Mallika and Atul speculate on

Mr Barve's sexual habits, she responds: "Mallika, as professionals we should not be concerned about the mode and cause of infection," emphatically denying an aetiology. Paradoxically, Sai's indirect refutation seems a more efficacious means of challenging homosexuality and HIV equivalence because it does not cite the former as a privileged category within STD prevention and awareness campaigns. The subplot divorces HIV/AIDS from Aditya and Uday's sexual practices, but this, unlike Nigel's explicit denials in *My Brother Nikhil*, is accomplished via an analogy. According to this rationale, HIV/AIDS can only be present on the periphery of the narrative if its link to male–male sex is to be successfully disclaimed. Of all three films, then, *Quest* is the most emphatic in its separation of the hitherto syncretized woman, virus, and homosexual into discrete elements. While this may suggest a lessening concern with mediation, the fact that such filtering devices are still present represents the impossibility of their eradication at this "transitional" moment.

The Present

Since the reading-down of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code in 2009, numerous films have emerged that treat male homosexuality at length. *Dunno Y—Na Jaane Kyun*, released in 2010, included Bollywood's first kiss between self-identified gay men, its first gay sex scenes, (albeit blurred by the Board of Censors), and its first celebratory image of gay love and desire. The film's two male lovers, Ashley (Yuvraaj Parashar) and Aryan (Kapil Sharma), declare their ardor for each other, and the obliqueness of "*Le Chale, Le Chale*" is replaced with the forthrightly passionate song "*Dabi dabi Kwahisein*" ("Hushed Desires"), which contains the lines "Tell me, tell me you love me" and plays as the two men cavort in waves breaking on a Goan beach. While family pressures eventually put an end to Ashley and Aryan's affair, feminine and familial advocacy do not arise: Aryan is an orphan and Ashley's family is kept apart from and oblivious to their relationship until the very end of the film.

Onir's *I am Omar*, the last of four shorts in his feature *I Am* (2011),[54] deals with the prejudice faced by men who have sex with men in the years of Section 377. Jai (Rahul Bose) meets Omar (Arjun Mathur) and they have dinner together, subsequently sharing a lingeringly erotic kiss in the latter's car. Discovered by a policeman (Abhimanyu Singh), on whom Jai is forced to perform fellatio, they

are blackmailed into paying 100,000 rupees in order to avoid imprisonment. A year later, after the reading-down of Section 377, Jai encounters Omar and accuses him of being in league with the police, a charge he does not deny. In contrast with Onir's earlier film, *My Brother Nikhil*, *I Am Omar* confronts the politics of Section 377 by openly representing Jai's embodiment of homosexuality, and, despite its politicism, it abandons its predecessor's concern with HIV/AIDS.

Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh, directed by Karan Johar,[55] differs markedly from *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana*; portraying the overtly gay Avinash's (Saqib Saleem) relationship with the married Dev (Randeep Hooda), the narrative culminates in a lengthy kiss and later anatomizes the dissolution of the latter's marriage. Johar has dispensed with the "jokey juvenalization" of his previous films, locating a sympathetically drawn and psychologically complex homosexuality in India itself. *Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh* begins with Avinash's coming out to his parents and leaving home to live his homosexuality more openly; in keeping with initially Euro-American models of alternative gay and lesbian communities, coming out involves a movement away from the biological family. To speak of a paradigm shift in such strategies of representation would be too generalized, especially given the specific distribution of some films and the ongoing filtration of homosexuality in others, but it is possible to identify a *movement away from* its ubiquitous mediation.

Conclusion

My Brother Nikhil, *68 Pages*, and *Quest/Thaang* represent homosexuality by means of extensive palliative strategies; as it is syncretized with the topoi of the heterosexual Indian woman and HIV/AIDS, the potentially homophobic reaction of conservative members of the audience is assuaged. Yet these forms of filtration and combination are not deployed unreluctantly, and the resulting ambivalence manifests itself in the attempt to detach homosexuality from feminine approbation and the pathogenesis of HIV/AIDS, which intensifies across the three works. Analyzing other popular films from the period might well yield alternative strategies of palliation; *Kal Ho Na Ho* and *Dostana*, for instance, employ humorous trivialization, geographical remoteness, and the mere simulacrum of homosexuality, which I have only touched on here. The syncretic strategies in question are emblematic of a "transition" from earlier gay cameos to the more freestanding depictions of homosexuality which have flourished in post-2009 cinema. Far from

usurping cinematic models of male–male bonding, these overt representations increasingly coexist with them. As I argued with regard to Raj Rao and Neel Mukherjee, homosexuality is always inflected by the past, so in its current cinematic incarnations it contains the history of syncretism explored throughout this chapter.

The reading-down of Section 377 both reflected and contributed to the wider portrayal of homosexuality, just as, to reiterate cultural critics like Fareed Kazmi and Ashis Nandy,[56] the concerns of popular film exist synergistically with wider public and political discourses. It is still too early to gauge what effect the reinstatement of Section 377 will have on Bollywood's depictions of same-sex desire, although many of its actors, directors, and producers reacted with outrage and disbelief on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Putting these caveats aside, the three films discussed circumnavigate love and sex between men with considerable success. Through their tropes of the sympathetic woman and HIV/AIDS, *My Brother Nikhil*, *68 Pages*, and *Quest/Thaang* introduced the viewing public to a tempered homosexuality, *as well as* suggesting the possibility of its substantive representation.

Conclusion

> [Astha] sank down next to [Pipee], feeling exhausted after the battle with Hemant, looking with cursory interest at the screen, registering indifferently the men and women, speaking broad American about the discrimination they faced as gays . . . there were clips of marches and demonstrations. Astha looked at the faces on the screen. All of them open, none of them living a life of lies.
>
> Pipee's voice breathed through the craven recesses of her mind, "We have to struggle for acceptance and the right to love as we feel. Don't you think so, Ant?" But try as Astha could, she could not connect to what she was seeing. Her own situation was different, though if Pipee didn't think so she would keep that information to herself.[1]

In this passage from Manju Kapur's novel *A Married Woman*, the widowed Pipee has persuaded her lover, the still-married Astha, to attend a screening at a local film festival in New Delhi. Astha's inability to connect with the scenes she is watching and their commentary in "broad American," a phrase that elides "English" and seems instead to signify a foreign language, could be interpreted as symptomatic of the gulf between "Western" gay identity and Indian same-sex desire. Alternatively, her reactions might be glossed in developmental terms: the enlightened gays and lesbians of the "West," who agitate and assert themselves before the video camera, are contrasted with Astha and her retrograde reluctance or incapacity to articulate her sexuality. Yet both these readings are unsustainable. Astha cannot be viewed as apolitical, for earlier in the novel she actively associates with the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch and gives a stirring anti-communal speech at Ayodhya in order to combat the resurgent nationalism which led to the destruction of the Babri Masjid. In the peroration she maintains, "In essence women all over the world are the same,"[2] , implying a universalism and transnational politics which might also facilitate self-definition as a lesbian. A sense of duty to her husband and children, however, outweighs the need to assert an individual identity premised

on sexuality. While it is often argued that family loyalties are stronger in India than the "West," Astha's situation is clearly comparable to that of many wives in Europe and North America, some of whom might well subordinate same-sex sexual urges to more pressing familial ties and abstain from LGB self-identifications. Within this syncretic assemblage, the opposition of the "foreign," politicized gay/lesbian, and the "indigenous," apolitical same-sex desiring subject emerges as a rudimentary fallacy.

In *68 Pages* the dichotomy is reversed when the identity of the lower-class *kothi*, Umesh/Umrao, becomes more declamatory than that of the upper middle-class, self-identified gay man, Kiran. Given that this is the fictionalization of a real-life reversal, as delineated by Parmesh Shahani in *Gay Bombay*, once again the integrality of literature and film to sexual politics is manifest. Shahani's monograph contrasts the Humsafar Trust with the Internet-run social organization Gay Bombay, noting, perhaps counterintuitively, that the predominantly Anglophone and middle- to upper-class members of the latter are apathetic toward sexual rights and HIV/AIDS. The Humsafar Trust, while founded by the gay Ashok Row Kavi, is now organized as a politically charged forum for those who predominantly self-identify as *kothi*.[3] If, to reiterate Lawrence Cohen, *kothi* has proliferated partly because of the requirements of HIV/AIDS funding organizations,[4] it would be disabling to see this syncretism as merely neocolonial. Such forms of politics and self-expression have emerged from the term's many regional South Asian equivalents, as well as the sense of identity reflected and engendered by the denotation "gay" and its history.

Some commentators have asserted that there is no equivalent to "lesbian" in the Indian languages other than English. Their contention may be exaggerated, but at first glance it has purchase—to reiterate Gayatri Gopinath, in modernity patriarchal accounts of womanhood render these subjects unthinkable or impossible.[5] Perhaps as a result of efficacious colonial and critical silencing, however, those who deny the existence of South Asian identities of female–female desire seem unaware of the nomenclatures of *rekhti* poetry and other historical narratives of love and sex between women. The repeated insistence on an ideological gap, then, eventually becomes complicit in its perpetuation. I have highlighted further problems with the claim, made more forcefully by Sita in *Fire*, that "there's no word in our language to describe what we are." To search for the carbon copy of such a materially and discursively anchored term is fruitless, resulting in the dismissal of

both loosely comparable identities and divergent conceptualizations of female–female desire in South Asian history. Accordingly, we do not find a cornucopia of essentializing "indigenous" signifiers of love and sex between women in the work of Kamala Das, or in films like *Sancharram*, but there is a sustained attempt to imagine "local" alternatives to lesbianism. Rather than supplanting this concept, such alternatives coexist with it syncretically, investing it with other histories and conceptions of the self.

As a valedictory example, the necessity for a diachronic approach toward sexual syncretism is reinforced by the oeuvre of Agha Shahid Ali. One of the most celebrated poets of the Indian diaspora, Ali was born in Delhi, grew up in Kashmir, and subsequently lived and taught in the United States of America. In his early work love and sex between men are uncommon, but his later poetry delineates male–male desire at length. The last collection he composed prior to his death in 2001, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, illustrates how this desire is syncretized as it dialogizes with Euro-American and Indian histories, partly as a result of the introduction of the *ghazal* form into English. In a *ghazal* titled "About Me," he writes: "I'm too close, too close for him to dream about me/ for he is held (he is *al-Mustalim*[6]) about me." Replicating the syntactic and collocational peculiarities of the Arabic and Urdu *ghazal* form in English, Ali defamiliarizes Anglophone poetry, perhaps in order to deny the absorption of the Indian/Kashmiri self into mainstream American culture. His subsequent citation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—"Not so, my lord. 'Seems', madam? Nay, it is. O God!/ I am too much in the sun. I know not 'seems' about me"—suggests that the Euro-American literary canon, like the *ghazal*, provides an inheritance of polysemy and ambiguity. If the wordplay of Ali's *ghazal* is a series of outward forms analogous to Hamlet's "inky cloak," its latent homoeroticism is comparable to "that within which passeth show," here perhaps an oblique synecdoche for the many unspoken and unstable male-male desires which continue to inform the Euro-American and South Asian present. Like the traditional *ghazal*, the poem addresses the divine male beloved, but it also pays homage to the human male lover whose "sleeping head" is cushioned by the arm of the poetic persona. The final couplet continues: "Elusively gay but not quite presently straight,/ One is stone in his own forest stream about me."[7] Ali seems to herald transparency by invoking the proclamatory signifier "gay," but even this is reimmersed in liminality, transformed by multiple literary histories, including those of the *ghazal* and Shakespeare, into that which escapes

definition, that which cannot simply be opposed to straight according to the predominantly dimorphic sexual logic of Euro-American modernity.

In an opposite movement, in another poem Ali rewrites Islamic accounts of angels:

> Do they dye their wings after Forever, tinting their haloes,
> aging zero without time, those androgynous angels?
> You play innocence so well, with such precision, Shahid:
> You could seduce God himself, and fuck the sexless angels.[8]

These couplets physicalize the historically metaphysical love relationship between the poet and the divine addressee. Ali's reinterpretation of Islamic descriptions of the sexlessness of angels as a sign of indeterminate sexuality is thrust into relief by the unambiguous and unexpected profanity of "fuck," reinventing the *ghazal* as an overt expression of gay politics and sexual urges, and evoking the gender performance of drag. Alluding to male–male desire outside the Euro-American context, elsewhere Ali emphasizes the benefits of transcending a monolingual Anglophone consciousness:

> If you wish to know of a king who loved his slave,
> you must learn legends, often sung, beyond English[9]

Probably referring to the love of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni for his slave Ayaz (see Introduction), more generally Ali's words are a reminder of those Islamic histories of male-male desire, emerging from Central Asia and beyond, which inform modern South Asian narratives of sexuality and may serve to relativize narratives of gay and lesbian identity. Much of Ali's later poetry, then, conjures different models and histories of love and sex between men, which are introduced to his readers in palpably syncretic and often alienating ways. Similarly, the frustration expressed by many Euro-American critics at the lack of a glossary in Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is partly the anxiety of being forced to confront what is not immediately knowable or assimilable, giving rise to affirmations of otherness and, more optimistically, the possibility of mutual transformation.

The present work is offered as a retort to those who elide the possibility of India's elaborating or even naming the "indigenous" same-sex desiring subject. If I have suggested the unthinkability of such a subject, this has not been insofar as s/he has been rendered "illegible,"

"inscrutable," "invisible," by the *modus operandi* of Indian history, whether this be contorted by the colonial encounter or otherwise. Instead, s/he is unthinkable as a pure entity who can elaborate "native" practices and identities of same-sex desire with no trace of the thinking from other geopolitical regions. Moreover, the radical restructuring of homosexuality in India, and its subsequent representation alongside diverse South Asian models of same-sex desire in literature and film circulating on a global scale, necessarily inflects gay and lesbian identities in Euro-America and elsewhere. In the narrative I have proposed, the homogeneity of homosexuality throughout the world is revealed as an increasingly untenable fiction.

Notes

Introduction

1. Abha Dawesar, *Babyji* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2005), p. 1.
2. There are pitfalls when using terms like "gay," "lesbian," or "homosexual" in India, unless they are consonant with "local" identifications. The problem of naming has been central in the "sexuality debates," as will shortly be delineated.
3. Hoshang Merchant, *Forbidden Sex, Forbidden Texts: New India's Gay Poets* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 62.
4. *Fire*, dir. by Deepa Mehta (Trial by Fire Films, 1996) [on DVD].
5. Geeta Patel, "On Fire: Sexuality and Its Incitements," in *Queering India*, ed. by Ruth Vanita (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 222–233; Jacqueline Levitin, "An Introduction to Deepa Mehta," in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, ed. by Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), pp. 273–283.
6. *A Lotus of Another Color*, ed. by Rakesh Ratti (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1993); *Queering India*, ed. by Ruth Vanita; *Seminal Sites and Seminal Attitudes—Sexualities, Masculinities and Culture in South Asia*, ed. by Sanjay Srivastava (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004); *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, ed. by Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005); *Sexualities*, ed. by Nivedita Menon (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007); *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. by Brinda Bose and Suhabrata Bhattacharyya (King's Lynn: Seagull Books, 2007).
7. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted, "Introduction," in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. by Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. xv–xvi (p. xv).
8. *Quest/Thaang*, dir. by Amol Palekar (Gateway Entertainment, 2006) [on DVD]; *The Journey* (*Sancharram*), dir. by Ligy J. Pullappally (Millivres Entertainment, 2004) [on DVD]; *My Brother Nikhil*, dir. by Anirban Dhar (Four Front Films, 2005) [on DVD]; *68 Pages*, dir. by Sridhar Rangayan (Humsafar Trust, 2007) [on DVD].
9. Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

10. Ibid., p. 154.
11. John De Cecco and John Elia, "Introduction," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 24, 3/4 (1993), 1–26 (p. 1).
12. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume One: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998).
13. David Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" *History and Theory*, 28, 3 (1989), 257–274 (p. 257).
14. W. C. Harris, *Queer Externalities: Hazardous Encounters in American Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), p. 25.
15. Gopinath, 2005, p. 12.
16. The term "nonheteronormative", positioning itself outside the precepts of a society that understands sexuality as dimorphic, does not have universal relevance in India.
17. Merchant, 2009, p. xix.
18. Teresa de Lauretis, "Habit Changes," *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 6, 2–3 (1994), 296–313 (p. 296).
19. Sanjay Srivastava, "Introduction," in Srivastava, 2004, pp. 11–48 (p. 28).
20. Gayatri Reddy, *With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identity in South India* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
21. David Eng, Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction," *Social Text*, 23, 1–17 (p. 3).
22. Lisa Duggan, "Making It Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review*, 22, 1 (1992), 11–31 (p. 26).
23. However, many self-identified "queer" people had used the term with more positive valences well before 1990.
24. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 56.
25. Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 215.
26. David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 26; p. 34.
27. Spivak defines this as the "strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest." Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 205.
28. Harris, 2009, p. 13.
29. Ibid., p. 179.
30. Yonatan Touval, "Colonial Queer Something," in *Queer Forster*, ed. by Robert K. Martin and George Piggford (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), pp. 237–254 (p. 242).
31. George H. Franks, *Queer India* (New Delhi: Cassell & Co., 1989), p. ix.
32. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
33. Dennis Altman, *Global Sex* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
34. Reddy, 2005, p. 221.
35. Foucault, 1998.

36. Reddy, 2005; Shivananda Khan, "MSM, HIV/AIDS and Human Rights in South Asia," Naz Foundation International Publications, 2004 <http://www.nfi.net/NFI%20Publications/Essays/2004/MSM%20&%20Human%20Rights.pdf> [accessed 4 December 2010]; Ashok Row Kavi, "Kothis versus Other MSM: Identity versus Behaviour in the Chicken and Egg Paradox," in Bose and Bhattacharyya, 2007, pp. 391–398.
37. Suparna Bhaskaran, *Made in India: Decolonizations, Queer Sexualities, Trans/national Projects* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 8.
38. Ruth Vanita, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
39. *Khush*, dir. by Pratibha Parmar (Kali Films, 1991).
40. Shivananda Khan, "Making Visible the Invisible," Naz Foundation International Publications, 1993 <http://www.nfi.net/NFI%20Publications/Essays/making%20visible%20.pdf> [accessed 3 January 2012] (p. 2).
41. Khan, 2004, p. 2–3.
42. See Ruth Vanita, *Gandhi's Tiger and Sita's Smile: Essays on Gender, Sexuality and Culture* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005).
43. Lawrence Cohen, "The Kothi Wars: AIDS Cosmopolitanism and the Morality of Classification," in *Sex in Development: Science, Sexuality, and Morality in Global Perspective*, ed. by Vincann Adams and Stacy Leigh Pigg (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 269–303.
44. Jeremy Seabrook, *Love in A Different Climate: Men Who Have Sex with Men in India* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 1–2.
45. Bhaskaran, 2004, p. 103.
46. Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993), p. 61.
47. Ibid., p. 62.
48. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. xxix.
49. Chong Kee Tan, "Transcending Sexual Nationalism and Colonialism: Cultural Hybridization as Process of Sexual Politics in '90s Taiwan," in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. by John C. Hawley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), pp. 123–137 (pp. 124–125).
50. Chris Berry, 'Asian Values, Family Values': Film, Video, and Lesbian and Gay Identities," in *Gay and Lesbian Asia: Culture, Identity, Community*, ed. by Gerrard Sullivan and Peter A. Jackson (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2001), pp. 211–231 (p. 212).
51. Marwan M. Kraidy, *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), p. vi.
52. See Charles Stewart, "Syncretism and its Synonyms," in *The Creolization Reader*, ed. by Robin Cohen and Paola Toninato (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 289–305.
53. Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw, "Introduction," in *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis*, ed. by Stewart and Shaw (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1–26 (p. 10).

54. Plutarch, *Moralia*, ed. by Jeffrey Hendersen, trans. by W. C. Hembold and others, 16 vols (London: Harvard University Press, 1917–1939), VI (2005), p. 313.
55. The Liddell Scott Dictionary defines "philia" as "friendly love, affectionate regard, fondness, friendship, distinct from erōs."
56. The Liddell Scott Dictionary defines this as "love, mostly of the sexual passion."
57. Plutarch, *Lives*, ed. by Jeffrey Henderson, trans. by Bernadotte Perin and others, 11 vols (London: Harvard University Press, 1917–1938), V (2005), p. 384–385
58. E.g. "Men condemn . . . the inconstancy of boy-lovers. They say that such friendships are parted by a hair." See Plutarch, *Moralia*, ed. by C. P. Goold, trans. by F. H. Sandbach and others, 15 vols (London: Harvard University Press, 1917–1939), IX (1999), p. 433.
59. N. K. Das, "Introduction," in *Culture, Religion, and Philosophy: Critical Studies in Syncretism and Inter-Faith Harmony*, ed. by N. K. Das (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2003), pp. 1–23 (p. 23).
60. Ram Puniyani, *Communal Politics: Facts versus Myths* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2003), p. 13.
61. Chris Berry and Fran Martin, "Syncretism and Synchronicity: Queer 'n' Asian Cyberspace in 1990s Taiwan and Korea," in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. by Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 87–114 (p. 89).
62. Ratna Kapur, "A Love Song to Our Mongrel Selves: Sexuality, Hybridity and the Law," *Social Legal Studies*, 8, 3 (1999), 353–368.
63. Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
64. Raj Rao, *The Boyfriend* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), p. 193.
65. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai, *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History* (New York: Palgrave, 2000).
66. Ibid., p. 25.
67. Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet, "The evolution of third-sex constructs in ancient India: a study in ambiguity," in *Invented Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India*, ed. by Julia Leslie and Mary McGee (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 99–132.
68. Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet, " 'Like a City Ablaze': The Third Sex and the Creation of Sexuality in Jain Religious Literature," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 6, 3 (1996), 359–384 (p. 383).
69. Vatsyayana, *Kamasutra*, trans. by Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
70. Ibid., xxxvi.
71. Ibid., p. 65.
72. Ibid., p. 68.
73. Ibid., p. 125.

74. At the same time, one must be careful when generalizing about Hindu nationalists' attitudes toward homosexuality. Arun Jaitley, for instance, recommends decriminalization, while Baba Ramdev routinely pathologizes and dismisses it.
75. A medieval Bengali version of the *Ramayana*, attributed to the fourteenth-century poet Krittivasa.
76. Amara Das Wilhelm, *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the Third Sex* (London: Xlibris, 2003); Devdutt Pattanaik, *The Man Who Was a Woman and Other Queer Tales from Hindu Lore* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2002).
77. Foucault, 1998.
78. Michael Sweet, "Eunuchs, Lesbians, and Other Mythical Beasts: Queering and Dequeering the Kama Sutra," in Vanita, 2002, pp. 77–84 (p. 78).
79. Foucault, 1998.
80. A ruler of the Ghaznavid Dynasty whose love for his male Turkic slave, Malik Ayaz, is widely acknowledged.
81. Reprinted in Tariq Rahman, "Boy-Love in the Urdu Ghazal," *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 7 (1990), 14.
82. Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, p. 108.
83. M. Yaqub Mirza, *An Anthology of Verse by Mir Taqi Mir* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1998), pp. 12–13.
84. Rahman, p. 12.
85. Rahman, p. 18; for translation, see Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, p. 189.
86. Vanita and Kidwai, 2000, p. 115.
87. Christopher Shackle, "The Shifting Sands of Love," in *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, ed. by Francesca Orsini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 87–108 (p. 100).
88. The Bhakti movement, which, like Sufism, privileged personal religious devotion over ritual, peaked between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries CE.
89. Carla Petievich, "Doganas and Zanakhis: The Invention and Subsequent Erasure of Urdu Poetry's 'Lesbian' Voice," in Vanita 2002, pp. 46–60 (p. 48).
90. Ruth Vanita, *Gender, Sex, and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India, 1780–1870* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1.
91. Ibid., p. 30.
92. Ibid., p. 13.
93. Ibid., pp. 6–7.
94. Petievich, 2002, p. 53.
95. Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," *India Feminist Studies*, 16, 2 (1990), 259–287.
96. Vanita and Kidwai, 2000.
97. Christopher Lane, *The Ruling Passion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 158.
98. Cited in Suparna Bhaskaran, "The Politics of Penetration: Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code," in Vanita 2002, pp. 15–29 (p. 15).

99. Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century (Studies in Imperialism)* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
100. Vanita and Kidwai, 2000.
101. Ibid., p. 196.
102. C. M. Naim notes that Muhammad Husain Azad's Urdu literary history, *Āb-i Hayāt* (1880), although including some of Mir's verses on the theme of "pederastic love" (*amrad-parasti*), contextualized them so as to occlude their homoeroticism. Naim avers, "Azad was . . . concerned how the colonial masters and the newly emergent 'reformed' readership in Urdu would view Urdu literary traditions. And so he made Mir into a peevish moralist." C. M. Naim, *Zikr—i Mir—The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet: Mir Muhammad Taqi "Mir"* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 201.
103. Pandey Bechan Sharma, *"Ugra," Cākaleṭ* (Calcutta: Tandan Brothers, 1953) (trans. my own).
104. Kamleshwar, *Ek Sadak Sattawan Galiyan* (New Delhi: Rajpal and Sons, 1979), translation my own, pp. 100–101.
105. A group of authors writing around Indian independence whose concerns were largely socialist and anti-imperialist.
106. Sa'adat Hasan Manto, *Black Margins*, trans. by M. Asaduddin (New Delhi: Katha, 2001), p. 226.
107. Ismat Chughtai, "The Quilt," in *Women Writing in India*, ed. by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, 2 vols (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), 2, pp. 129–138.
108. Shobha Dé, *Strange Obsession* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992).
109. AIDS Bedbhav Virodhi Andolan, *Less than Gay: A Citizens' Report on the Status of Homosexuality in India* (Delhi: ABVA, 1991).
110. Sunita Singh et al., *A People Stronger: The Collectivization of MSM and TG Groups in India* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), p. 63.
111. Ghosh, 2010, pp. 42–43.
112. *Maryada . . . Lekin Kab Tak?* (*Keeping Our Limits . . . But Until When?*), dir. by Waseem Sabir et al. (DJ's Creative Unit, 2010–2012).
113. Kamala Das, *My Story* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1976); "Iqbal," in *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1992), pp. 57–64 (first publ. in Debonair, 1974); "The Sandal Trees," in *The Sandal Trees and Other Stories*, trans. by V. C. Harris and C. K. Umer (Hyderabad: Disha Books, 1995), pp. 1–26.
114. Vijayadan Detha, "A New Domesticity" ("Naya Gharvas"), in *The Dilemma and Other Stories*, trans. by Ruth Vanita, ed. by Madhu Kishwar (New Delhi: Manushi Prakashan, 1997), pp. 3–35.
115. Suniti Namjoshi, *Because of India: Selected Poems and Fables* (London: ONLYWOMEN PRESS, 1989), p. 22; *Feminist Fables* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1993); *The Conversations of Cow* (London: The Women's Press, 1985); *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (London: The Women's Press, 1989).

116. Manju Kapur, *A Married Woman* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).
117. Ibid.
118. Ashwini Sukhtankar, "Introduction," in *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India*, ed. by Ashwini Sukhtankar (New Delhi: Penguin, 1999), pp. xiii–xli.
119. Qamar Roshanabadi, "*Vande Mataram*," in Sukhtankar, 1999, pp. 408–409 (pp. 408–409).
120. Minal Hajratwala, ed., *Out! Stories from the New Queer India* (Mumbai: QueerInk, 2012), p. 5.
121. Vikram Seth, *The Golden Gate* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999); *A Suitable Boy* (London: Phoenix, 1999).
122. Raj Rao, *Bomgay* (London: Aark Arts, 2005); *Hostel Room 131* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010).
123. Leslie de Noronha, *The Dewdrop Inn* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 2004); Makarand Paranjape, *The Narrator* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co, 1995); P. Parivaraj, *Shiva and Arun* (Swaffham: Gay Men's Press, 1998).
124. Vikram Chandra, "*Artha*," in *Love and Longing in Bombay* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 163–227.
125. Rahul Mehta, *Quarantine* (New Delhi: Random House, 2010); Neel Mukherjee, *A Life Apart* (London: Constable, 2010).
126. Kunal Mukherjee, *My Magical Palace* (Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2012).
127. E.g. it is absent from the Eros Entertainment DVD.
128. *Badnam Basti*, dir. by Prem Kapoor (Prem Kapoor Productions, 1971) [on DVD]; *Razia Sultan*, dir. by Kamal Amrohi (Rajdhani Films, 1983) [on DVD]; *Umbartha*, dir. by Jabbar Patel (Satya Chitra International, 1982).
129. *Mast Kalandar*, dir. by Rahul Rawail (Rahul Rawail Productions, 1991).
130. Thomas Waugh, "Queer Bollywood, or 'I'm the player, you're the naive one'," in *Keyframes*, ed. by Amy Villarejo and Matthew Tinkcom (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 280–297 (p. 296).
131. *Bombay Boys*, dir. by Kaisad Gustad (Film Works and Kismet Talkies, 1998); *Bomgay*, dir. by Riyad Vinci Wadia (Wadia Movietone, 2006).
132. *Chutney Popcorn*, dir. by Nisha Ganatra (First Look International et al., 1999) [on DVD]; *A Touch of Pink*, dir. by Ian Iqbal Rashid (Martin Pope Productions and Sienna Films, 2004) [on DVD]; *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, dir. by Pratibha Parmar (Kali Films and Priority Pictures, 2006) [on DVD]; in a similar vein, see *Chicken Tikka Masala*, dir. by Harmage Singh Kalirai (Seven Spice Productions Limited, 2005) [on DVD].
133. *I Can't Think Straight*, dir. by Shamim Sarif (Enlightenment Productions, 2008) [on DVD]; see also *The World Unseen*, dir. by Shamim Sarif (Enlightenment and DO Productions, 2007) [on DVD].
134. Few Indian playwrights thematize same-sex desire, although Mahesh Dattani is one enduring example. Predictably, his most famous work is the screenplay for the film *Mango Soufflé* (2002), which was marketed as "the first gay male film from India."

135. *Girlfriend*, dir. by Karan Razdan (2004) [on DVD], *Men Not Allowed*, dir. by Shrey Shrivastava (Shri Vardan Pictures, 2006) [on DVD].
136. *Dedh Ishqiya*, dir. by Abhishek Chaubey (VB Pictures and Shemaroo Entertainment, 2014).
137. *Vettaiyadu Villaiyadu*, dir. by Gautam Menon (Seventh Channel Productions, 2006); *Kal Ho Na Ho* (*Tomorrow May Never Come*), dir. by Karan Johar (Dharma Productions, 2003) [on DVD]; *Dostana* (*Friendship*), dir. by Tarun Mansukhani (Dharma Productions, 2008) [on DVD].
138. Shohini Ghosh, "Bombay Cinema's Queer Vision," in Bose and Bhattacharyya, 2007, pp. 417–436 (p. 417).
139. *Dunno Y—Na Jaane Kyun*, dir. by Sanjay Sharma (Starcast, 2010); *It's a Man's World*, dir. by Saurabh Sengupta (Arc Films, 2010).
140. *I Am*, dir. by Onir (Anticlock Films, 2011).
141. *Bombay Talkies, Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh*, dir. by Karan Johar (Viacom18 Motion Pictures, 2013).
142. Ashis Nandy, "Introduction," in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*, ed. by Ashis Nandy (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1–18; Fareed Kazmi, *Sex in Cinema: A History of Female Sexuality in Indian Films* (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2010).
143. R. Radhakrishnan, "Globalization, Desire, and the Politics of Representation," *Comparative Literature*, 53, 4 (2001), 315–332 (pp. 328–329).
144. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2003).
145. Berry, 2001, p. 218.
146. Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7, 2 (1990), 295–310.

Chapter 1

1. See Shohini Ghosh, *Fire* (Queer Film Classics) (London: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2010); Geeta Patel, "On Fire, Sexuality and Its Incitements," in *Queering India*, ed. by Ruth Vanita (London: Routledge, 2002); Brinda Bose, "The Desiring Subject: Female Pleasures and Feminist Resistance in Deepa Mehta's *Fire*," in *The Phobic and the Erotic: The Politics of Sexualities in Contemporary India*, ed. by Brinda Bose and Suhabrata Bhattacharyya (King's Lynn: Seagull Books, 2007), pp. 437–450; Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, "Approaching the Present—The Pre-text: The Fire Controversy," in Bose and Bhattacharyya, 2007, pp. 17–90.
2. Ghosh, 2010, p. 28.
3. Sunil Mehra, Manu Joseph, and Saira Menezes, "What's Burning?," *Outlook India Magazine*, December 14, 1998 <http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?206676> [accessed March 5, 2010].
4. Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. xvi.

5. Suparn Verma, " 'I simply can't understand the stereotyping of women as filmmakers who make soppy family dramas'," *Rediff on the Net*, October 24, 1997 http://www.rediff.com/entertai/oct/24deep.htm> [accessed July 15, 2010].
6. Shamira Meghani, "Articulating 'Indianness': Woman-Centered Desire and the Parameters for Nationalism," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 13, 1 (2009), 59–67 (pp. 65–66).
7. *Earth*, dir. by Deepa Mehta (Cracking the Earth Films Inc., 1998).
8. Jacqueline Levitin, "An Introduction to Deepa Mehta," in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, ed. by Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), pp. 273–283 (p. 273).
9. Patel, 2002, p. 230.
10. *Water*, dir. by Deepa Mehta (Deepa Mehta Films et al., 2005) [on DVD].
11. *Ramayan*, dir. by Ramanand Sagar (Sagar Enterprises, 1986–1988). The 78-episode televised *Ramayan* aired between 1986 and 1988. It adapted Valmiki's *Ramayana* and incorporated several other works. Although critics denounced its low quality, it was an unprecedented national success, reflecting and hastening the Hindu Right's rise in popularity.
12. Bandyopadhyay, 2007, p. 76.
13. Ibid., p. 77.
14. Heidi R. M. Pauwels, *The Goddess as Role Model: Sita and Radha in Scripture and on Screen* (New York: OUP, 2008), p. 523.
15. In the original *Ramayana* by Valmiki, Sita, wife of Rama, is abducted by the demon Ravana, king of Lanka, and imprisoned in his palace. After she has been rescued, she must undergo the *agni-pariksha* (trial by fire) to prove that she has not enjoyed sexual relations while imprisoned in Lanka. This moment has been of decisive significance in both the construction of women by Hindu patriarchy and feminist resistance.
16. This text, one of the medieval *Puranas*, was written in Sanskrit around the fourteenth century CE.
17. *Shri Krishna*, dir. by Ramanand Sagar (Sagar Enterprises, 1994).
18. Pauwels, 2008, p. 524.
19. The South Asian Empire presided over by the Mauryan Dynasty between 321 and 185 BCE.
20. The four *ashramas* or life stages were, among other texts, enunciated in the *Manusmrti*. While no longer followed by most Hindus, they still metaphorize the different phases of life. *Brahmacharya* is the formative stage of celibacy and learning, followed by the *grihasthya* stage of householders and procreation, wherein sexual pleasure is permitted and even promoted. Subsequently, *vanaprastha* involves gradually retiring from one's duties before *sannyasa*, the absolute withdrawing from the world to gain enlightenment.
21. Jyoti Puri, *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-colonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 178.
22. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth: An Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 198.

23. Robin Sharma, *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* (London: Element/Harper Collins, 1997).
24. Ginu Kamani, "Interview with Deepa Mehta," *Trikone Magazine*, October 1997, pp. 11–13 (p. 11).
25. The film gives the following explanation: many years ago, a king was enchanted by the goddess Parvarti and filled with needles. His devoted wife spent a year removing them, but her maidservant tricked her into leaving his side before she had extracted the final needle. When the maidservant plucked it out, the king awoke, and he was so grateful that he married her and made his queen a maid. However, the latter eventually regained her rightful position through wifely devotion, *pujas*, and fasting.
26. Ruth Vanita, *Love's Rite: Same-Sex Marriage in India and the West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).
27. India's most famous monument to love, built by the emperor Shah Jahan upon the death of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, and completed in 1653.
28. Madhu Kishwar, "Naive Outpourings of a Self-Hating Indian: Deepa Mehta's 'Fire'," *Manushi*, 109 (November to December 1998), 3–14.
29. Agence France Press, "Hindu leader says lesbian film should be about Moslem family," Agence France Press, December 14, 1998, on *The South Asian Women's Network* <http://www.sawnet.org/news/fire.html> [accessed January 2, 2009].
30. Shohini Ghosh, 2010, p. 96.
31. *Pakeezah*, dir. by Kamal Amrohi (Mahal Pictures Pvt. Ltd. and Sangeeta Enterprises, 1972) [on DVD].
32. Rita Bhattacharya, "Ligy J. Pullappally's The Journey," *Desiclub.com*, 2006 <http://www.desiclub.com/bollywood/bollywood_features/bolly_article.cfm?id=253> [accessed June 6, 2010].
33. Tharayil Muraleedharan, "Women's Friendship in Malayalam Cinema," in *Women in Malayalam Cinema*, ed. by Meena T. Pillai (New Delhi: Orient Black Swan, 2010), pp. 153–177 (p. 170).
34. Maya Sharma, *Loving Women: Being Lesbian in Underprivileged India* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2006).
35. See Mandakranta Bose, "Satī: The Event and the Ideology," in *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, ed. by Mandakranta Bose (New Delhi: OUP, 2000), pp. 21–32.
36. Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by L. Chrisman and P. Williams (Malaysia: Pearson Education, 1994), pp. 66–111 (p. 103).
37. Sudhir Kakar remarks, "Not that the idea of the completely autonomous individual, like the *sannyasi* who has freed himself from all worldly relationships and bonds, does not exist in India. However, it is an idea that is not mainstream and it does not apply or appeal to most people. In India, the opposite of autonomy is seen to be connectedness, which is highly valued, while in

the West, the opposite of autonomy is dependence, which often has very negative connotations." Sudhir Kakar and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *India Analysed: Sudhir Kakar in Conversation with Ramin Jahanbegloo* (New Delhi: OUP, 2009), p. 43.

38. The Nayars were one of the few groups to be organized matrilineally in India. Only the children of females could become members of the family unit (known as the *taravad*), property was passed down through the female line, and the youngest daughter inherited the family home, thereafter becoming its custodian. See Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847–1908* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1976). Many of these customs were dying out by the twentieth century, yet they are still considered an essential constituent of Malayali identity and are used to explain women's high status in present-day Kerala in comparison with other Indian states.
39. She is referring to how Nayar women formed attachments to male soldiers, who spent extended periods away from the village and frequently perished in battle, thus necessitating Nayar polyandry and matriliny.
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44. Kakar and Jahanbegloo, 2009, p. 46.
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Chapter 2

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34. Ibid., p. 73.
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52. Ibid., pp. 1–2.
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57. Ibid., p. 25.
58. Ibid., p. 15.
59. Ibid., p. 17.
60. Ibid., p. 13.
61. Ibid., p. 13.
62. Ibid., p. 4.
63. Ibid., p. 4.
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65. Das, 1995, p. 5.
66. Ibid., p. 26.
67. The householder stage of the four-stage Hindu life cycle (or the four *ashramas*).
68. Das, 1995, p. 2.
69. Ibid., p. 26.
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Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

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32. This district in Mumbai is the location of India's largest abattoir. Ibid., p. 79.
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Chapter 5

1. As I noted in Chapter 3, both terms may be translated as "friend," yet they tend to be more multi-faceted, encompassing an emotional intensity and possibly romantic and/or sexual dimension which are largely absent from the present-day Euro-American concept of male-male friendship. See Raj Ayyar, "Yaari," in *A Lotus of Another Color*, ed. by Rakesh Ratti (Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1993), pp. 168–169.
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19. Altman, *Global Sex*, 2001, p. 75.
20. See Cohen, 2005.
21. See Aarthi Chandrasekhar, "Film Review: Marked by pain, bound by hope", *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics*, 6, 2 (April–June 2009), 113 <http://ijme.in/index.php/ijme/article/view/429/4089> [accessed April 1, 2014].
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55. *Bombay Talkies, Ajeeb Dastaan Hai Yeh*, dir. by Karan Johar.
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Conclusion

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Index

ABVA (AIDS Bedbhav Virodhi Andolan), 32, 137
Ali, Agha Shahid, 35, 161–2
anal sex, 15, 23, 113–14
Ashok Row Kavi, 13, 33, 137, 146, 149–50, 160, 167
Awadh, 96–8

Babri Masjid, 47, 108, 117–18, 126, 130, 159
Baburnama, 93–4, 105
Babur, Zahir-ud-din Muhammad, 93–5, 105, 117
Bersani, Leo, 9
bhakti, 27, 169 n.88
bisexuality, 15, 35, 81, 88, 90, 102, 104
Bollywood, 36, 38–40, 54, 134–6, 140, 143–4, 148, 156, 158
Bombay Dost, 32
Bomgay, 35–6
The Boyfriend, 21–2, 35, 40–1, 107–8, 110–121, 124, 126, 129–31
Butler, Judith, 5, 12, 66

caste, 21, 41, 64, 75, 91, 95–6, 107–8, 110–111, 113–16, 120, 124, 128, 130, 136, 181 n.23
censorship, 41, 88, 93, 98–9, 144
Central Asia, 94
Chocolate, 29–30
Chughtai, Ismat, 3, 30–1, 37, 97
Class, 16, 21, 32–3, 38, 41, 43–4, 47, 107–8, 110–116, 120, 124–5, 127–30, 136, 160
closet, the, 35, 88, 105, 153–4, 168
Cohen, Lawrence, 15, 33, 160
Colonialism, 2, 11, 15, 18, 20, 22–3, 27–9, 31, 33, 41, 96, 98–9, 104, 122, 127, 160, 163

dalit, 107–8, 110, 114, 117, 119
  see also caste and untouchable
Das, Kamala, 2, 18, 21, 33, 41, 60, 63–85, 161, 175 n.2, 177 n.71
Dawesar, Abha, 1, 34
Dedh Ishqiya, 37
Dé, Shobha, 31
Detha, Vijayadan, 33
Dostana, 37–8, 136, 150, 154, 157
dosti, 133–4, 143, 179 n.46
  see also yaari

Epistemology of the Closet, 12
  see also Sedgwick, Eve

Facing the Mirror, 34–5
feminism
  and cinema, 134, 153
  feminist theory, 7
  and *Fire*, 45
  within Hinduism, 49, 58
  as ideology, 64
  Indian literary feminism and Kamala Das, 40–1, 64–9, 72, 84
  as metanarrative, 2
  Third-Wave and Second-Wave Feminism, 66
  "Western feminism", 74
Feminist Fables, 33, 40

Fire, 2–4, 32, 40–1, 43–58, 61–2, 160
Forster, E.M., 11
Foucault, Michel, 4–5, 12–13, 25, 31, 89, 109–10, 124

gay, as identity, 1, 5–6, 21, 35, 37, 41, 110, 126, 150–2, 162
  association with HIV/AIDS, 137–8, 146
  association with openness, 39, 91–3, 105, 150, 157, 159–62
  and class or caste, 110–120, 129–31, 160
  and community, 125, 138, 140, 157
  and dimorphism, 45, 90
  as Eurocentric, 6, 14, 100
  evolution of term, 14, 68
  gay activism, 15, 21, 45, 59, 88, 91–3, 109, 159
  gay internationalism, 7, 12, 15
  gay and lesbian rights, 32, 43–4, 56, 61, 89, 91–3, 159
  gay liberation, 15, 41, 91–3
  and the internet, 32–3
  and *khush*, 14
  literature or cinema as gay, 121, 139
  politics of usage in India, 11–12, 14–15, 20–2, 56
  relationship to queer, 8, 10
  and San Francisco, 35, 91–3
  social transgressiveness, 9, 108, 124
  and syncretism, 12, 15, 17–18, 20–2, 35–7, 39, 41, 92–3, 110, 129–31, 144, 162–3
  and whiteness, 7
gender
  and dimorphism, 8
  and feminism, 65–6
  and identity, 13–15, 21
  and indeterminacy, 88–9, 99, 142–3
  and inversion, 7
  and maternity, 77
  nonnormative gender, 9, 24, 35, 55, 58, 62, 108, 111–12, 137, 139, 147–50, 152, 162
  normative gender, 113, 125
  and same-sex desire, 14, 56
  as social construction, 5, 12
  in South Asian history, 23–4, 34, 98
  taxonomies of, 22–3, 110
George, Rosemary Marangoly, 64–7, 74, 82
Ghalib, 99, 179, 184, 188–90
ghazal, 25–6, 28, 35, 41, 77, 95, 98–9, 104, 161–2
Ghosh, Rituparno, 38
Ghosh, Shohini, 32, 37, 43, 54, 134, 145
The Golden Gate, 35, 87–8, 91, 95, 99
Gopinath, Gayatri, 3–4, 6, 141, 160

Halberstam, Judith Jack, 125
hijra, 8, 13, 21, 28, 33, 75, 108, 112–13, 138–9, 149–50
  see also gender
Hinduism, 19–20, 22, 24–7, 35, 43–57, 60–2, 64, 68, 75, 95–6, 108, 117–20, 126–7, 129, 141, 149, 169 n.74, 173 n.11, 173 n.15, 173 n. 20, 177 n.67, 181 n.33
Hindu, *see* Hinduism
HIV/AIDS, 14–15, 33, 37, 42, 135–41, 144–58, 160, 167, 170, 183 n.16, 184 n. 37
homoeroticism, 12, 14, 19, 23, 25–6, 28, 35, 54, 77, 87, 95, 97–100, 102, 136, 142, 161, 170 n.102, 179 n. 46
homophobia, 1, 9–10, 29–30, 33, 36, 61, 65, 99, 152, 155, 157
homosexuality, 20, 90, 136, 163
  binary of homosexual/heterosexual, 20, 90, 136
  and colonialism, 17, 28–9, 31
  criminalization of, 10, 20
  decriminalization of, 37
  equivalents in pre-colonial South Asian history, 22, 97

in Euro-American history, 13, 25, 68, 70, 72, 76, 89, 93
and Hindu nationalism, 16, 24, 120, 169 n.74
and HIV/AIDS, 37, 137–9, 145–6, 149–52, 155–7
and Occidentalism, 39
and other elements of identity, 41, 107–8, 110–120, 122, 129–30, 136
as perversion or evil, 30–1, 55, 61, 102, 134
rights and liberalisation, 1, 32–9, 133–40, 144, 146, 148, 156–8
as signifier of essential subjecthood or orientation, 4–6, 9, 11, 13–14, 18, 21, 28, 41, 56, 68, 70, 74, 80, 85, 103–4, 109, 121, 124, 140, 145, 153–4
and syncretism, 17, 34, 37, 41–2, 72, 76, 81, 88, 92–3, 105, 108, 110–120, 129–30, 134–6, 143–5, 148–9, 156–8, 162
The Humble Administrator's Garden, 94
Humsafar Trust, 33, 146, 149–50, 160
hybridity, 17, 20

"Iqbal", 33, 69, 76–7, 82, 177 n.71
Islam, 19–20, 24–7, 35, 45, 53, 64, 77, 95–9, 117–20, 126–7, 129, 162

Johar, Karan, 37–8, 136, 157
The Journey/Sancharram, 3, 39, 43, 46, 55–62

Kal Ho Na Ho, 37–9, 136, 154, 157
Kamasutra, 23–5, 34, 49
Kamleshwar, 30, 36
Kapur, Manju, 34, 159
Kerala, 21, 37, 41, 46, 59–63, 66, 68–9, 78–80, 85, 175, 182, 192
Kidwai, Saleem, 22, 24–6, 28–9, 66, 79
Kishwar, Madhu, 53
Kothi, 13, 15, 21, 33, 108, 111, 112–13, 138–9, 146–7, 149–50, 152, 160

language
Arabic, 25, 77, 98, 161, 185 n. 6
English, 2–3, 11, 13, 16, 21, 30, 33, 35, 38, 40–1, 43–5, 52, 56, 61, 63–4, 75–6, 78, 87, 92, 94–5, 97, 100–2, 105, 111–12, 119, 152, 159–62
Hindi, 3, 13, 14–15, 19, 30, 33, 38, 40, 45, 52, 56, 100, 111
Urdu, 13–14, 22, 25, 27, 29, 31, 35, 77, 97–100, 161
lesbianism
association with openness, 4, 34, 45, 52–3, 60, 68, 150, 159–60
association with perversion and pathology, 31, 37, 72, 81
and community, 37, 116, 140, 157
and dimorphism, 45, 67
as essential identity, 1, 5, 21, 31, 33–5, 55–7, 59, 65, 68–70, 72–4, 76, 79, 85, 150, 159
as Eurocentric, 14
and feminism, 74
lesbian and gay activism, 21, 43–5, 56, 59, 144, 159–60
lesbian and gay politics, 32, 43–5, 56, 81, 144, 159–60
lesbian literature and film, 139
and other elements of identity, 117, 159
politics of usage in India, 2, 11, 13–14, 33–4
relationship to queer, 7, 10
and religion, 53
"situational lesbianism", 34, 55
and syncretism, 17–18, 31, 34, 36–7, 56–62, 68–73, 161–3
lesbian, *see* lesbianism
A Life Apart, 35, 40, 107–8, 121–3
Lihaf/The Quilt, 3, 30–1, 37, 97, 170, 189

Mahmud of Ghazni, 25, 162
Mappings, 88–9, 91, 105
Mehta, Deepa, 2–3, 32, 35, 40–1, 43, 45–53, 55, 61–2
Mir Taqi Mir, 26, 77, 170 n.102
Mukherjee, Neel, 3, 35, 40–2, 107–8, 121–3, 125–31, 158
Muslim, *see* Islam
My Brother Nikhil, 3, 37, 40, 42, 135, 137, 139, 147, 152–8
My Story, 33, 64–5, 69–72, 80, 82–3

NACO, 138–9, 148
Namjoshi, Suniti, 33, 40
nawab, 41, 88, 96–7, 104
nayar, 56–8, 60–1, 64, 69, 80, 83, 85, 175 n.38, 175 n. 39
Naz Foundation, 15, 38, 135, 137–8
Naz Report, *see* Naz Foundation
neocolonialism, 6–7, 15, 21, 160

Onir, 3, 37–8, 143–5, 156–7
oral sex, 23
Orientalism, 39, 123–4
  see also Said, Edward
Out! Stories from the New Queer India, 35

Pakeezah, 54
Palekar, Amol, 3, 37, 135, 152–5
panthi, 13, 15, 21, 113
penetrative sex, 28, 90, 113–14
Phir Milenge, 140
Plutarch, 18–19
postcolonial studies, 17, 18
Pullappally, Ligy, 3, 21, 37, 40–1, 46, 55–6, 59, 62

queer, 2–13, 17, 35, 37, 41, 63–7, 69, 73–4, 76, 84, 108–10, 115, 124–5, 134, 140–2
Queer as Folk, 140
queer theory
  applicability to Kamala Das, 64–5, 69
  as metanarrative, 2, 69
  politics of, 5–12
Quest/Thaang, 3, 37, 42, 135, 137, 139, 141, 152–8

Radha, 3–4, 44–5, 47, 49, 51–5, 58, 62, 141
Ramanand Ramayana, 47–8
Ramayana, 24, 47–9, 51, 117, 173 n.11, 173 n.15
Rangayan, Sridhar, 3, 37, 40, 135, 146–7, 150
Rao, Raj, 3, 21–2, 35–6, 40–1, 107–20, 122, 124, 126, 128–31, 134, 158
Razia Sultan, 36
Reddy, Gayatri, 8, 12–13, 113, 149–50
rekhta, 27
rekhti, 27–8, 99, 160

Said, Edward, 16, 39, 122, 124
  see also Orientalism
68 Pages, 3, 37, 42, 133, 135, 137, 139, 141, 146–55, 157–8, 160

The Sandal Trees, 33, 60, 76, 78–85
Seabrook, Jeremy, 15
Section 377, 28, 32, 37–9, 88–9, 104, 135, 144, 156–8
Sedgwick, Eve, 5, 12, 20, 45, 136, 142
Seth, Vikram, 2, 18, 21, 35, 40–1, 87–101, 103–5, 162
Shiv Sena, 44, 53
Shri Krishna, 49
Sita, 3–4, 44–5, 47–9, 51–4, 58, 62, 141, 160, 173 n.15
Spivak, Gayatri, 8, 57, 166 n.27
A Suitable Boy, 35, 40, 87, 93, 95–105, 162

Summer Requiem, 89, 105
swadeshi, 40, 108, 121, 126–8, 130

taravad, 57, 60, 64, 69, 73, 76, 80, 83–4, 175 n.38
tawa'ifs, 27, 98
transgenderism, 7–8, 11, 35, 38, 147, 153
see also hijra
transnationalism, 4

Ugra, 29–31
Untouchable, 114–16, 181 n.23
see also caste and *dalit*

Vanita, Ruth, 22, 24, 27–9, 52, 66, 79, 96–7, 134–5

yaari, 41, 88, 100–5, 133–4, 179 n.46
see also dosti

"Oliver Ross brings fresh insight to the debates and texts he examines, undertaking some excellent exegeses of much-analyzed, as well as under-analyzed, texts. He bravely takes on the current received view that gay identity is 'irremediably Eurocentric.'"
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This book explores representations of same-sex desire in Indian literature and film from the 1970s to the present. Through a detailed analysis of poetry and prose by authors like Vikram Seth, Kamala Das, and Neel Mukherjee, and films from Bollywood and beyond, including Onir's *My Brother Nikhil* and Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, Oliver Ross argues that an initially Euro-American "homosexuality," with its connotations of an essential psychosexual orientation, is reinvented as it overlaps with different elements of Indian culture. Dismantling the popular belief that vocal gay and lesbian politics exist in contradistinction to a sexually "conservative" India, this book locates numerous alternative practices and identities of same-sex desire in Indian history and modernity. Indeed, many of these survived British colonialism, with its importation of ideas of sexual pathology and perversity, in changed or codified forms, and they are often inflected by gay and lesbian identities in the present. In this account, Oliver Ross challenges the preconception that, in the contemporary world, a grand narrative of sexuality circulates globally and erases all pre-existing narratives and embodiments of sexual desire.

Oliver Ross is a Teaching Fellow of English at the University of Cambridge, UK.

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ISBN 978-1-137-57075-8
9 781137 570758
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Cover image SFM GM WORLD / Alamy
Cover design by Will Speed